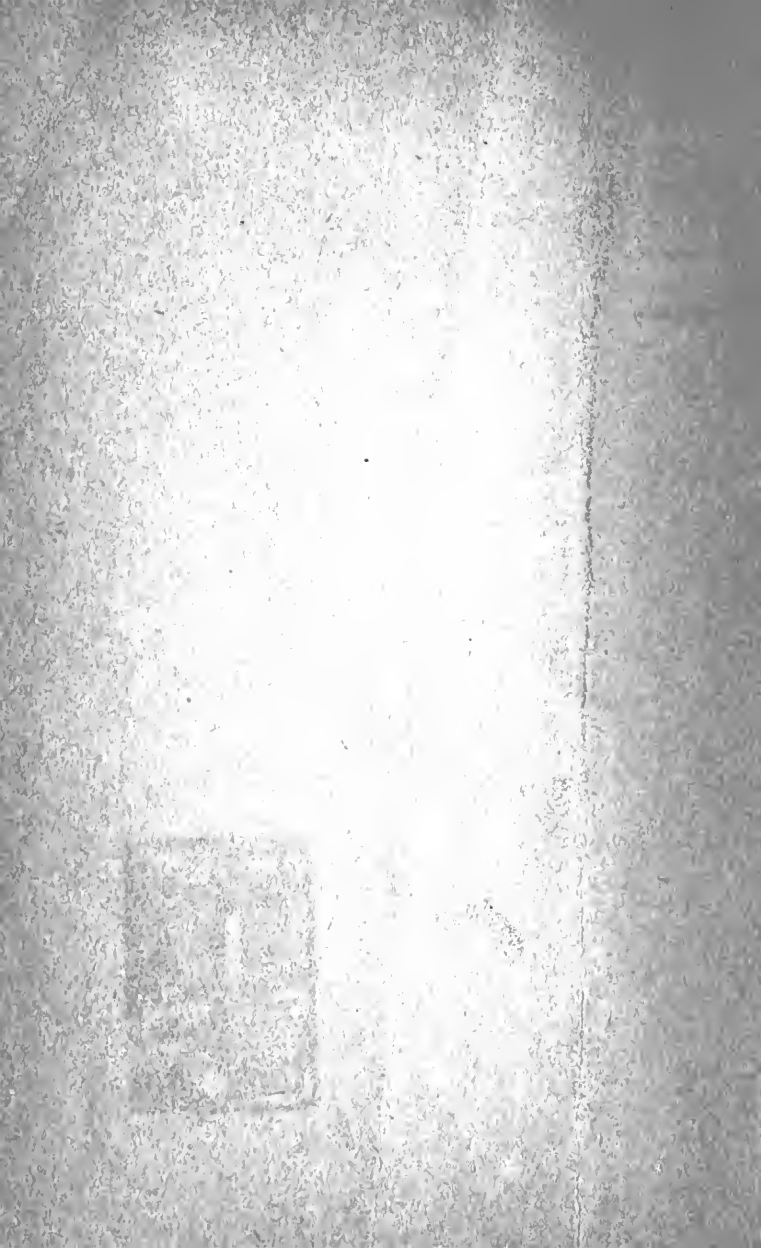


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ISABEL

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THE KING AND ISABEL

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*To prevent possible misconceptions, I
think it necessary to state that none of the
characters in this story are representative.*

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THE KING AND ISABEL

CHAPTER I.

IN the drawing-room of a house in Portman Square, towards ten o'clock in the evening, the guests of the Sydneys were assembled. Addressing a thin dark man of forty, of diplomatic bearing, Mrs. Sydney asked:

"Did the Duke not say, Mr. Viroly, that he would come over to us early?"

"Certainly," was the reply, "he told me so not later than this afternoon at his hotel. You may be sure he will soon arrive."

While this question was being put and answered, the guests ceased speaking, and it was evident from the expression of their faces that the personage alluded to was one of exceptional importance.

"How sad it must be," the blonde Mrs. Sydney said, "never to see one's native land. Does he not feel it greatly?"

"He does, but he bears up admirably against the hardness of his lot."

"Well," said Lady Strange, a handsome woman who was seated at her hostess' side. "If

the Fatherland's shut off, the remainder of the world is open, and I think the Duke does not fail to explore it."

"No doubt," said Viroly, "he is a great traveller. He has always wished to study other peoples in the interest of his own should he be called upon to rule it."

"What are his chances now?" enquired General Bellew, a veteran erect and keen.

"The Government is at present powerful, but there are signs of a reaction."

"That's curious," Lady Strange remarked; "the last time I was over there I heard that the people were more than ever wedded to democracy."

"They may profess to be," said Viroly, "but at the bottom of their hearts they desire a return to the old régime which made our country great."

"Is it true," asked an elderly lady, "that the Duke has bought Lord Ister's yacht?"

"Yes," the Duke's supporter said. "As he has to make many sea journeys in the year, he thought it would be better to acquire a vessel of that size."

"She's a fine boat," said Mr. Sydney, a robust man with a short brown beard and light blue eyes. "She's larger than mine by at least a hundred tons."

Viroly remarked in a somewhat reverential tone: "She carries a chaplain and a doctor."

"In that case," said Lady Strange, "the

spiritual as well as the bodily needs of those on board will be attended to."

Viroly bowed.

"As you are pleased to say, Lady Strange, as you are pleased to say."

"For my part," said the General, "if I were the rightful heir to a throne as the Duke is, I don't think I should find much time to yacht. I should do nothing but plan revolutions!"

"In the present day," said a man of middle age, with a wealth of grey-streaked hair, "they're easier to plan than to accomplish."

"Oh, Professor Miles," Mrs. Sydney said, "we know in which direction *your* political opinions tend."

"Political opinions?" repeated the Professor. "I did not know I had any."

"Well," explained Mrs. Sydney, "you often talk of social justice. Is not that expressing a political opinion?"

The Professor reflected for a moment.

"Yes, you may be right, perhaps it is."

"Has any régime," asked Lady Strange, "ever been based on social justice?"

The Professor turned towards her:

"None."

"Yet I'm quite sure Mr. Viroly will tell us that his sovereign's is destined to be one of justice."

Thus appealed to, Viroly without a smile replied:

“ Oh, the incarnation of it ! ”

The Professor said : “ I trust I may be still alive at its inauguration. ”

Viroly replied : “ It is my hope that you may be still quite young when that event occurs. ”

“ That would be difficult, seeing that I am already old. ”

“ Old ! ” said the General. “ Who is old to day ? No, no, the health and the zest of life have so increased of late that we all continue valid to the end, doing the things of youth, living the young life. That is the new spirit : *Semper juvenis*. ”

As the General was over seventy, the guests all smiled complacently, and Miles remarked : “ If nature’s willing to endorse it, that is an admirable motto. ”

“ Nature can be coerced ! ” exclaimed a lady with a tumefied, massaged face, and some of the guests glanced at her wistfully as though they thought that she had done her best to practise what she preached.

“ I heard to-day, ” said Mrs. Sydney, “ that the Duke’s cousin was coming over soon. Does anybody know if that is true ? ”

Viroly, to whom she seemed to appeal, said :

“ Yes, King Charles will be here next month, and there is to be an extensive shoot at Redmont in his honour. ”

“ A perfect holocaust, no doubt, ” said Lady Strange.

“As you are pleased to say,” repeated Viroly, and this time she re-echoed with an ironic bow: “As I am pleased to say.”

Count Limbach, a London German, a man of fifty, with a round, jovial face and snow-white hair, remarked:

“The King is such a splendid shot! He never misses anything. His bags are all colossal, and as for big game, why, in a single day in Africa, I have been told, he killed two lions, besides three leopards and a panther.”

“Remarkable statistics,” Miles observed with the utmost gravity, while Mrs. Sydney glanced at him apprehensively.

“Yes,” the Count continued with Teutonic pertinacity, “it’s in the family. His father was a deadly shot, and his uncle too. Is it not an irony of fate that his father—such a marksman—should have, himself—been shot?”

“Alas!” said Miles, “that is the lot which often lies in store for princes. Killers of big game; big game themselves!”

Upon this Mrs. Sydney looked severe and her guests uncertain. Lady Strange, however, who took privilege into her own hands, said:

“I like, Professor, the way in which you put things,” and Mrs. Sydney forced herself to smile.

A young lady who had not spoken said in a slightly foreign accent, “Is it not the very danger which they run that makes these

sovereigns so sympathetic? They move from day to day in an atmosphere of danger. Their lives are always at the mercy of fanatics."

"Yes, Miss Lambert," said the General, "and that is just the charm of it."

"Perhaps, for a warrior like you, General," said Lady Strange; "but for others the state of constant scare is not a pleasant one to live in."

"Indeed it is not," said the massaged lady with conviction, and many of the guests were of the same opinion.

At this stage of the conversation, the door was opened, and the Duke of Varlemon appeared. Young, somewhat below the middle height, though well proportioned, he walked with an air of self-esteem, which was even apparent in his physiognomy. For the rest, his face, in spite of its well-shaped nose and mouth, large dark brown eyes, possessed no racial character. His hair was of the colour of his eyes, and he wore a somewhat large moustache. On his breast, beneath his collar, gleamed an order. He was accompanied by a man of thirty, "correct," as the French say, and of military bearing.

The guests all rose in his honour.

"I have taken the liberty," he said in English almost without accent, "of bringing with me my friend, the Marquis of Irlay, one of my most staunch supporters."

Mrs. Sydney welcomed warmly the friend thus

introduced, and after a few words with the Duke as to his health, she presented to him those of her guests with whom he was unacquainted.

"Lady Strange you already know," she said, and the Duke made an especially low bow to the lady who was so commonly considered as one of the greatest beauties of her time.

"This is somewhat a surprise," she said. "I thought you were too occupied at Redmont to come up."

"It's true," the Duke replied, "I have had a meeting of my friends there, but that is over now, and I am free."

"Have you been issuing more manifestoes?" she enquired.

"No; for the present we await the progress of events."

Then the Duke chatted with the guests, and the General took him in hand and plied him with questions on the relative strength of armies, telling him, as well, how thoroughly he was in sympathy with his attempts to bring his country back to a sense of its own dignity and to wrest its government from the hands of the Atheists who controlled its destinies. To all this the Duke listened with apparent interest, assenting to everything the warrior said, but moving away as soon as he obtained a chance.

Presently Mrs. Sydney proclaimed bridge, and invited the Duke to take a seat at her table. This, however, he politely declined to do, alleging

that, as he was an indifferent player, he much preferred abstaining, and adding that he had never been able to spare time for the mastery of bridge.

Mrs. Sydney looked disappointed, but as her royal guest was obdurate, she was obliged to content herself with securing the Marquis in his stead.

Lady Strange was also not disposed to play as well as the Professor, Miss Lambert, and a fair young girl. The latter formed a group, while Lady Strange and the Duke took up a position at some distance from the rest.

"I guessed that I should meet you here to-night," he said.

"That is why you came, of course."

"Yes," he answered in a low tone, "yes, although busy."

"I am very flattered that you should lay aside your own affairs on my account. That is an honour, Duke, an honour."

"The Prince of Pleve was with me after dinner, and wanted to submit a most important scheme. I simply left him with his papers."

"That sounds a little cruel."

"Cruel? Can *you* employ that word?"

"Perhaps in that connection it is a little out of place."

"Enigmatic as you always are."

"Tell me," said Lady Strange after a few moments, "what *hauts faits* you have been doing

on the Continent. Have you had any fresh encounters with wild boars? "

"In Holland, as you know, that would be difficult. No, the only encounter I had there was with my political committee. A little difference of opinion, but I settled it."

"They bowed, in the end, to your authority? "

"They did."

"Do you not wish all men would do the same? "

"All my countrymen, perhaps."

"And countrywomen? "

"Those of them whom I know do not dispute it."

"What a happy time you would have if you were among them now."

The Duke looked somewhat disconcerted.

"Will you always use your wit at my expense? "

"No, not always. You shall have a respite presently."

"You never treat my cousin as you're treating me! "

"A different kind of man! He isn't half so serious."

"And then he actually reigns."

"You think that counts for something? "

"Yes, I'm sure of it."

"What does it matter to me, I wonder? "

"It's true you haven't many traits in common with most women. That I discovered long ago."

"Suppose now, to make peace, I invited you

to dine with me to-morrow, would you come? "

" You know I would. "

" Then I invite you. "

Pacified, the Duke said, looking longingly into her face: " In all my travels, whether I go to the north or to the south, there's one place that is graven in my memory, that I see when I shut my eyes to dream. "

" And that place is? "

" Your house! "

She smiled.

" You have only seen it once! "

" That was sufficient! "

" Wonderful! "

" Some day, perhaps, " he said, " I may induce you to believe in my devotion! "

Although he said this in a low tone, she looked round somewhat apprehensively, but the guests were absorbed in bridge, and were also too far off to hear.

" Devotion? That is a big word. You forget we are in England where it is the custom to use moderate expressions. "

" Yes, " he muttered with ill-humour, " I forget that often. Although I've been here half my life, I have not yet, I fear, acquired self-restraint. "

" Now I think you are mistaken. You're really very self-restrained. "

" Must I take that as more satire? "

" No! Simply as plain truth. "

"Very well. I leave my character in your hands for delineation. Perhaps you know me better than I know myself."

"That isn't quite impossible."

"I don't suppose it is, considering your penetration. Who could think that in the company of so much beauty there should be so much intelligence. The phenomenon is somewhat rare in a woman of the world."

"I wonder it does not repel you."

"It might in any other but yourself."

"So you excuse me everything. You make me quite defenceless."

"I think you ought to say I take from you the power of attack."

"Duke, you are turning my own arms against me!"

"I'm afraid I don't gain much by that."

"You gain experience."

"Of failure!"

"That depends upon your view of the enterprise. Come, let us watch the play."

Saying this she rose and went up to the nearest table, followed by the Duke, and then, when they had observed the toilers for some moments, they joined the Professor's group in the window corner.

Miles was listening to the prattle of the young girls about novels. Lady Strange thanked him for the treatise he had sent her. "I'm quite

convinced," she said, "that the author's right in his analysis. I thought the way in which he made it was quite masterful."

"I guessed you would," Miles answered. "He's quickly rising to the first rank of psychologists."

"I should be glad to know him."

"And you shall, next time he is in England."

Miles proceeded to discuss the book without troubling to address the Duke. Lady Strange, however, brought the latter in to the conversation by turning and enquiring of him if he had ever met Carl Heinz, whose book they were discussing. But the Pretender shook his head and smiled indulgently as though he were, in a sense, absolved from studies of that kind. But Miles now turned towards him.

"I knew your father. We were at the university together."

"Ah, really," the Duke said with affected interest.

"Yes," continued Miles. "I remember that we had talks on politics."

"Oh, really?" repeated the Duke with scarcely disguised indifference.

"A subject," Miles said piqued, "in which you evidently have not inherited his interest."

Lady Strange endeavoured to appease them by declaring that the evening was too warm for either psychology or politics, and that she was responsible for having introduced the former

theme. "Duke," she said; "tell Miss Lambert of your wanderings. Professor, relate to me your latest climb."

By this means a collision was averted, for both men did as she had bid them.

Presently, however, when the table at which his friend was playing was broken up, the Duke withdrew in spite of Mrs. Sydney's efforts to retain him longer.

"Remarkable young man," said Miles when he had left. "I should like to see the state he ruled. I should say that at every corner of his capital he would erect his effigy!"

"You see," said Lady Strange, "he was trained to be a hero to himself."

"And I should say he had become a god."

"Well, well, is it not a pleasing spectacle to see a man so confident of his superiority, so rich in self-esteem!"

"I can't say I should call it pleasant."

"Can you not look upon him as a type which interests by reason of its rarity?"

"If it will please you, Lady Strange, I'll try to view him in that light."

When the Duke and his companion left, the former dismissed his motor, declaring that as the night was fine he would prefer to walk. Accordingly they set out for their hotel on foot.

"And so, Marquis, you believe that little matter's settled?"

"Undoubtedly. She said she would have probably done better had she sued for breach of promise, as they call it here; but in the end she was resigned."

Robert said: "I'm much indebted to you, Irlay. You've rendered me a service. One never knows where these small entanglements may lead. And now I mean to have no more of such affairs. At all events in such conditions. *Tabula rasa*, my dear Irlay, for the future."

"I think that is a wise decision," Irlay said approvingly. "It's one I'd like to take myself; but find it somewhat difficult."

Robert laughed exceedingly.

"My dear Irlay, keep clear of complications! As much as I, you owe it to the cause."

"I shall endeavour to follow your example, sir."

"That's right. *Tabula rasa* let your motto be."

"The worst of it is," said Irlay, "that when the table is made clear, such are the infirmities of human nature, that it becomes encumbered again soon."

"I think," said Robert, "that age will settle that."

"Perhaps."

As they walked down Regent Street, Robert suddenly exclaimed: "Is it possible that I should be for ever destined to this outcast life! What are you doing over there? Can you no longer

make the smallest stir? Is there no one left among you who can rise up in the House and flagellate this Government of thieves? You come and tell me that the cause is flourishing. And yet I see that beyond an interruption now and then, not a single Royalist can make a speech which tells and brings back prestige to our side. Day after day I read the papers in the hope of seeing some good sign; but there is nothing! The Socialists monopolise attention."

"Well, sir, many of our orators have grown old, and there are few new ones to replace them. Public attention, as you say, is with the Socialists, and I would venture to suggest that Mirtor's scheme of a coalition with them for offensive purposes might be worth consideration."

But Robert would have none of this. With a magnificent gesture he declared:

"I would rather die than ally myself with them!"

"Irlay said no more upon the subject, and they reached the Circus. As they were walking down the Haymarket, Robert said:

"I often wish that I had a house in London. But of course that is impossible. It would involve keeping up relations which would be awkward and extremely irksome in my unfortunate position. I regret at times that my father did not choose France as a land of exile. But he did not on account of a habit the French have of expelling any stranger at the request of a

foreign power. It would be unpleasant to be ordered to pack one's trunks."

"Assuredly. It would be an indignity to which you, sir, could never be exposed."

"You are right, Irlay. There are things one can, and things one cannot do."

With this dictum, Irlay entirely concurred, and they reached the hotel in perfect unity of mind. They ascended to the Duke's reception-room, which was decked with flowers and with photographs. On the table were some letters which the evening's post had brought. The Duke's first act was to contemplate himself in the glass above the mantel.

"I suppose, Irlay, I should grow a beard. What is your opinion?"

"There is, of course, no rule," said Irlay, after reflecting for a moment. "Yet I think that a beard would be by no means out of place."

"It may be worn, Irlay, and soon. Its appearance would synchronise with an epoch in my history."

"Long or short?" the Marquis asked.

"Oh, short."

Irlay bowed. "May I tell our friends on my return of the probable approaching change?"

"No, Irlay. Please wait awhile lest I should change my mind."

Then Robert, while offering his friend a cigarette, glanced at the letters on his table. Suddenly his face grew serious. "I recognise,"

he said, "the hand of the Princess! Excuse me for a moment."

He broke the seal, opened and read a letter of four pages. When he had finished, he exclaimed:

"Ah, yes, a new epoch is about to open. My aunt has matrimonial projects for me, which I shall be forced to entertain. She represents, and rightly, that the direct succession is in jeopardy as long as I remain unmarried."

"Undoubtedly," said Irlay in a tone of deference, "undoubtedly."

"I should have wished to wait until we had regained our rights, but at the present rate, that seems impracticable."

"Perhaps," said Irlay dubiously.

"I read in a novel only yesterday that marriage nowadays binds to little while securing much."

"Yes, it frequently secures a very great deal indeed."

"In my case, there is no doubt, it should."

"It should," repeated Irlay with an affirming nod.

"That's what I say to the Princess, and that's what she says to me, but up to now, I must confess, the opportunities have not been great."

"You may depend upon it the Princess will arrange it all in the most auspicious way. Might I ask if there is anyone in view?"

"Yes, a sister of the Duke of Melen,"

"I know the young lady," Irlay said, "I met her at a reception not very long ago. She is still young, and has good hair."

"Hm! that is not saying very much."

"Oh, I don't wish for a moment to disparage."

"No, you are too prudent. Ah, well, I shall obtain a photograph."

CHAPTER II.

THE next day, in the drawing-room of her house in Pont Street, Lady Isabel Strange awaited the arrival of the Duke of Varlemon. Her friend and companion, Maud Sinclair, a fair young woman of five-and-twenty, was placing white camelias in the vases on the mantel, occasionally retreating a few paces to judge the general effect. Isabel, stretched on a sofa at the farther end of the room, observed her with an indulgent smile.

"The camelia, you know, Maud, is the flower of his house. He'll think it a delicate attention on my part."

"Well, you don't mind, do you?"

"Not a straw. He will be all the more amusing."

"You treat him very hardly, and he's really very nice."

"Oh you, Maud, think all royalties divine."

"Well, they're the next thing to it, aren't they?"

"They're held to be, at any rate by some."

"How oddly you speak of them at times!"

Isabel did not reply to this remark, but said after a pause:

"I like your enthusiasms, Maud. They are so rare in these days!"

"Oh, yes, I haven't become *blasée* yet, I hope. I find a lot of interest in life."

At six the Duke arrived.

"You see me troubled," he said as he took a seat. "I had hoped to spend some weeks in London, but the Princess, my aunt, desires my presence at Redmont to-morrow."

Imitating the somewhat pompous manner of this piece of information, Isabel replied:

"I regret to learn that owing to a call from your aunt, the Princess, you should be unable to stay longer in our midst."

Robert cast a half-suspicious glance at Isabel, but yet continued:

"The life we lead at Redmont is not exactly joyous. As you know, there are rules to be observed, traditions from which one is unable to depart."

"Quite a ceremonial, no doubt, to be maintained."

"Well, yes, it is unavoidable."

"Poor Duke, you have my sympathy!"

"You see, when my father was alive, he discharged the duties of our house, but they now devolve on me."

"Well, well, as long as you don't take it all too seriously, I shouldn't think it would hurt you much."

Without noticing the last remark, the Duke continued:

"I should greatly wish to introduce you to my

aunt. I should like above all things that you should then come down to stay with us."

"Is the stay dependent on the prior introduction?"

"Well, yes, in a certain measure. You see there are vexatious rules to be observed."

"Which I would be very loath to break."

"But I trust that when my aunt is next in town, you will meet her often."

"You know, Duke, I'm a little bit afraid of your august relative."

Robert laughed indulgently.

"The Princess is somewhat more austere, no doubt, than I could wish; but I know that *you* will captivate her quickly."

"You credit me, perhaps, with powers which I don't possess."

"I appeal to Miss Sinclair to say if that is so."

Maud shook her head: "No, no."

But Isabel laughed freely: "Very well, I'll try my best. And now tell us, Duke, how you have been spending your precious time."

"This afternoon," he said, "I inspected a school for our children in the North of London. I was present while they took their tea and I insisted on bringing away with me one of the little rolls they make in the refectory. You've no idea how pleased they were when they saw me put it in my pocket."

"Ah, yes," said Isabel with the utmost gravity, "such marks of high solicitude can never fail in

their effect. And then they always have what the French call '*une bonne presse*.' "

But Robert said with heat: "I hope you don't suppose I did that with an eye to press encomium?"

"Not for a moment, I only meant that that is the result."

Robert shrugged his shoulders. Presently he said:

"I almost wonder, sometimes, whether you are really in favour of the Monarchist régime."

"You wonder that! And yet, you know, I come of a family of cavaliers who fought like demons for King Charles."

"I know," said Robert deferentially.

But Isabel passed on to other themes, and Maud joined in the conversation which continued upon current topics till the dinner was announced.

On the table there were more camelias: also some other flowers in the Dracian colours, and the intention was so evident that Robert said:

"I recognise familiar emblems, and I thank you for the kind thought they betray."

Isabel replied: "I wish it had been mine, but it was Miss Sinclair's," and upon this the Duke bowed to Maud: "I compliment you on the taste of the arrangement."

Maud grew crimson. "I am delighted if it appears correct."

Robert said presently: "I hear the Prince of

Tordigo will be here shortly. As you know, he is a great botanist, and he has now a large collection of the Dracian flora."

Isabel said: "Has he renewed the concession for the gaming-tables at Sta Rovina?"

"I believe he has."

"I have a friend who is a statistician and who collects the number and the details of the gamblers' suicides that take place there. Do you know if the rate per month is rising or if it remains the same?"

"Really, how should I?"

"If you were ruling Drace, would you permit roulette in your dominions?"

"If the law allowed it, how could I object? Under a constitution one can't do what one likes."

"Or like what one does, perhaps."

"Not always."

"No," said Maud, "I have always sympathised with modern kings for that!"

"For that alone?" asked Isabel.

"Oh, no, for many other things besides."

"Ah, Maudie, they ought to know it!"

"Some day, perhaps, they will."

There was a laugh, and the conversation changed.

When the dinner was over and they had returned to the drawing-room, Maud played awhile, and then, declaring that she had to write a letter, withdrew to the curtained-off boudoir at

the extreme end of the room after asking Robert to excuse her.

"At length," the Duke said to Isabel as soon as they were alone. "we can talk without restraint!"

"My dear Duke, one should always exercise restraint!"

"Yes, but it's sometimes hard. You know, you surely must know how hard I find it to forbear from telling you the things which you with your penetration cannot fail to read upon my lips."

"No, I'm afraid my penetration, as you are pleased to call it, isn't equal to the task of reading the unspoken word. It may make guesses, but it cannot be quite sure they're right."

"Listen! I told you last night that your home was stamped upon my memory. You knew, I think, what I then meant to convey."

"Yes, but if you say it, I shan't be able to go to you at Redmont!"

"You always find some reason to rebut me!"

"You see you are so rash!"

"Ah, well, as I also said last night, I shall never learn your self-restraint. But self-restraint is only possible when the feelings are subdued, and that is what mine are not at present."

"A little *fleur d'oranger*, dear Duke—with sugar and water as in France? I know no better sedative."

"Mock me always. I am the target for your arrows."

"My arrows? Oh, you must admit they're very blunt."

"They hurt me more than you suppose!"

"Poor Duke. What *can* I do to heal your wounds?"

"I will tell you. You can let me look into those matchless eyes, you can let me take that faultless hand."

"You forget that if Miss Sinclair can't hear what we are saying, she can see what we are doing."

"I'm quite convinced she would not look, and even if she did, what then? She would only judge that I had fallen a victim to your fascination, as many have before!"

But Isabel shook her head. "No, no. I can't allow proceedings of that kind. You have *your* rules, I have mine."

He sighed. "Ah, well, you cannot tie my tongue, you cannot hinder me from saying that there are no rules that can ever cause a man to cease admiring your beauty."

"Do you think that I derive much satisfaction from being told these pretty things so plainly?"

"No doubt you may grow tired of the repetition. But really it is unavoidable. When I compare you with the vast majority of the women whom I meet, I realise your wonderful superiority."

"It's very kind of you to say so, but did you ever pause to think of the significance of saying them? You know that you're precluded from making serious love to the widow of a simple knight."

"Ah, now you strike a heavy blow! My lot is hard! I am foredoomed to a dynastic marriage. Even at the present time there are plans on foot, but when I am with you, I laugh at them. For your sake, I would throw all duty to the winds."

"That would be unwise and quite unheard of. In the history of your own country, where is the monarch who so forgot his interest to think of anything unorthodox in matrimonial affairs?"

But Robert said: "The truth is I am sometimes tired of the part I have to play and envious of other men at liberty to follow the inclinations of their hearts."

"Now, you know quite well that you would never wish to change positions with a single one of them. No, you are of a race apart. You are not free as other men. You belong to a tradition. You are upon a pedestal, and firmly screwed to it."

"How well you can display to me my chains! And yet you know that for you I would gladly try to break them."

"No, I do not know it; and what is more I do not want you to attempt the task. What a limp and lifeless thing is an abdicated king! No, a king must always be prepared to king just

as a pretender must be ever willing to pretend."

An expression of impatience was visible on Robert's face. He said, after a pause: "You place me in a vice and then take pleasure in observing me."

"I scarcely think it's I who place you there. It's circumstances, Duke, or whatever agency controls the fate of men!"

He was silent for some moments, contemplating her as though he sought to guess her motives. Suddenly he said:

"If I am bound, you at least are free."

"Yes, I have been told that once or twice before. It's singular how ready you men are to remind a widow of her freedom!"

"Do not let us quarrel. Only I entreat you to believe me earnest in my cult of you, I do not think of consequences: whoever did when moved by an irresistible impulsions?"

"Irresistible? You must allow me to be sceptical. I do not think that there is any impulse which you or I could not resist if we took pains."

"Do you suppose that I am merely acting when I talk like that? If so, you are mistaken."

"No, I credit you with a desire for sincerity."

"Really, you are more difficult to understand than any woman I have ever met. You remind me of a marsh light that one sees but cannot reach."

"Do not try to reach it. Let it always be elusive. Believe me it is better so."

Robert rose, walked up to the mantel, and pointing to the flowers said:

"Is it really true that you had no share in this?"

"Not the smallest. Both the idea and the execution were my friend's."

Robert said, returning to his seat: "Then I begin to be discouraged!"

Isabel laughed, and the Duke pursued:

"You think, no doubt, that one should not admit discouragement. But to you, one must own everything."

"I should not advise you to do that!"

"May I ask why?"

"It would be most imprudent, and I warn you that if you have any secrets you must not confide in me."

But Robert appeared sceptical. "You calumniate yourself! There is no one I would rather trust than you!"

"It is kind of you to say so, but extremely rash. How do you know that I am not an Anarchist disguised?"

Robert smiled. "Do not try to paint yourself in sombre colours, for the paint refuses to adhere."

"Oh, very well. Believe in me if you insist upon it."

Maud now returned, and the conversation was continued on the topics of the hour. At ten the Duke withdrew.

As soon as he had left, Isabel, throwing herself upon her back on the sofa, and crossing her hands behind her neck, gave herself up to her reflections. Maud played a Chopin waltz. Presently a servant entered who announced, "Mr. Arthur Vincent."

A tall man entered—his age thirty, his physique good and his face classical. A wealth of curled hair gave him what is sometimes called a leonine appearance. He walked with a short, firm step. Bowing very low to Isabel, he kissed her hand in the Continental manner.

"I am late," he said as he took a chair, "but I was busy writing, and then I was by no means anxious to meet that little Highness who, you told me, would be here."

"You missed a treat. He was most entertaining, I assure you."

"If he was equal to his reputation, I've no doubt he was."

"He surpassed his reputation. He was quite idyllic!"

"But after all he is as he was trained to be."

"Perhaps this evening he was sympathetic?"

"Well, I almost think he was."

Vincent ejaculated "Oh," and a slight frown creased his forehead.

"Comparatively, of course," she added.

Somewhat reassured, he asked: "I wonder why you encourage the little man?"

"I think it very bold of you to wonder that. If I did not see these people I should miss one side of life!"

"I don't think you would be the loser."

"Ah, but I take a comprehensive view of things. Don't you think so Maud?"

"Oh, certainly. I always think you a philosopher."

Vincent said despondently: "I'm afraid that's true."

"It's just my comprehensiveness, you see, that allows me to receive on the same evening a Royalist like Varlemon and a Socialist like you."

"But in reality your sympathies are on our side."

"Somewhat, as long as your side does not grow autocratic and its leaders do not play at kings."

"The more I see of you," he said reflectively, "the less I seem to understand you."

"Now that is really surprising. With the knowledge of the motives of existence which your plays betray, surely you must fathom humble me."

"Complex me, I think you should have said, for that is what you are."

To this proposition Maud assented with conviction.

"I'm sure that's right, Isabel puzzles me sometimes."

As she said this she rose, and declaring that

she was tired after a long day spent in making calls, kissed Isabel and then withdrew. As soon as the door was closed, Vincent exclaimed :

“ At last I have an opportunity to speak to you alone. Have you reflected since our last meeting ? ”

“ Oh, no, no, no, I told you I could not reflect. I said, if you remember, I had no wish to marry.”

“ Then it is a refusal ! ”

“ Yes ; but not by any means a withdrawal of my friendship, and I should be very sad if you should henceforth keep entirely away, because I have a very warm regard for you.”

“ A warm regard ! You say this to me who have for you the deepest love ! In which way do I not please you ? Tell me, and I will mould myself to your ideal.”

As she was silent, he continued :

“ I have long thought that you have some *arrière pensée* ; that there is some reason for your diffidence with me. Yes, yes, it's not the first time. I have seen it in the manner of my friends towards me. Why not acknowledge that you have some doubts as to my origin ? ”

Isabel protested, but Vincent added :

“ Yes, that is it. You cannot tell me, but I know it well. I have sometimes spoken to you of my mother, who died five years ago, but never of my father, and report, since I became known, has given me a variety of fathers, not one of them authentic. I have kept silent, because I could

not say, 'My father was called Vincent. He was my mother's husband.' No, that I could not say, and I have suffered because I could not say it, suffered deeply. Ever since I was a boy at school this disability has thwarted me and made me realise acutely the falseness and the cruelty of the conventions of our code which makes the child bear the responsibility of his parents' acts. But I have rebelled against this stigma which a child brings with him at his birth, and that is one of the chief reasons why I have joined the party of revolt which asks for greater justice than the world, in its present state, affords."

He paused, and perceiving a look of sympathy in Isabel's face, continued:

"I have told no one the story of my origin. My mother, who lived in great seclusion, had only a few friends to whom the truth was known, and they did not divulge it. She lived the life of the woman of culture that she was in the midst of books and flowers in her home in Kent, devoted to the rearing and education of her only child—myself, visited by my father once or twice a year, in the early years for a few days at a time. And who do you suppose he was?"

Isabel said: "You bear a strong resemblance to the present King of Astia."

"His uncle was my father!"

For some moments neither spoke. Isabel said at length:

"I had long guessed that there was something

of the kind. But why should you be troubled on that score? Marriage is a mere convention, and the child of such a mother as you have described has no cause to feel shame. Such a parentage is by no means bad. The *maestria* which you display in all you write is due, I am convinced, to your heredity."

"You try to minimise the social tare, for you are sympathetic; but at the bottom of your heart you know that it exists and counts."

"With me it counts for very little, but with the prejudiced, I can quite imagine it must be important."

"Even you are affected by it. You cannot help it. Prejudices of that kind are, if I may say so, in the blood. They can only be removed by generations of a different mentality, by the disappearance of a host of misconceptions. I cannot give a father's name to the woman I should marry. I have but a maternal name to give."

"You are not the first in that position, and you will not be the last."

"Not as long as there are princes."

He rose and stood before her for some moments looking down at her. At length he said: "Since I have entrusted my secret to you, I feel a kind of shyness in your presence. In spite of my new ideas, the old ones, I suppose, still cling. Ah, if I could see a single token of encouragement in those wonderful eyes of yours, I should

take heart again. But no. I can read friendship in them—nothing more!”

Suddenly he began to pace the room. “Some day I shall break away from all restraint, and then I shall give utterance to the rancour that has long lain dormant in me.”

“Surely,” she said, “that would be unwise. If there is one tyranny against which it is useless to rebel, it is the tyranny of usage. Believe me, Vincent, we are all slaves. Humanity loves slavery, or it would not establish it whenever it obtains a chance.”

“Humanity as it has been hitherto conceived, perhaps. But the time is coming when it will be something better than a derision to itself.”

“Are you sure of that? Are you certain that you are not engaged in the culture of chimera?”

“If I thought so, if I thought there was no other existence possible than that which we are forced to lead, I would cease to take all interest in life!”

“What! you with your talent, with your power of attraction for my sex, *you* talk of ceasing to take interest in life!”

“If my power of attraction, as you call it, availed me, it might be different, but that apparently is not the case.”

“It does avail you, but not to the extent you wish. Why must you be categorical; why not have confidence in the tendency of things to adjust themselves?”

He resumed his seat beside her and sat gazing at her for some moments. He said at length: "Because it is not in my nature to be lukewarm, because I have waited too long in vain."

She began to count upon her fingers. "One, two, three, four—you make the fifth impatient man whom I have had to deal with in the last six months! Really my lot is hard!"

"That is the penalty you have to pay for being irresistible."

"Now please be rational. You've no idea what powers of resistance we possess, stored up for times of need."

"I wonder if you are ever serious, or if you live life merely for its lighter aspects."

"You would not have me live it for its darker, would you?"

Vincent could scarcely repress a smile, but he turned away from her, and suddenly his eyes rested on the camelias on the mantel."

"Those," he said, "are the emblems of the house of Drace. They are no doubt in honour of that little Robert who was here just now."

"Yes, your cousin."

"My cousin! He would be as little ready to admit the relationship as I. There is one advantage I have over him. He must make a dynastic marriage. I am free."

"That is not the only advantage you possess."

"A compliment from you cannot but sound ironical."

"Merely because you do not take a reasonable view of things."

"Reason? I cannot reason in your presence. I abdicate my reason when I enter here."

"Nonsense."

"You may laugh, but it is true. Here am I, rejected, almost ridiculed, and yet I do not leave. I stay to hear my sentence constantly repeated. Is that a reasonable thing to do?"

"I think it is. By that means you become inured."

"If you talk like that you will drive me to the ladies who perform my plays."

"That would be a pity, for I think you worthy of a better fate."

"There is one question," he said with firmness, "which I feel I have a right to ask. Are you in love with someone else?"

"How crudely you ask that! With your command of language you might have put it better. All the same I'll answer you. I do not think I am."

"You do not *think*. Then you are not quite sure?"

"Oh, really, if you must be so extremely categorical I shan't be able to reply."

He perceived that she was ruffled.

"Pardon me, my revolt is over. I am submissive to the conditions you impose. Grant me the privilege of continuing to contemplate you—since I must aspire to no more."

"I like you better so, although I don't entirely believe in your submissiveness. But I'm convinced you know my state of mind far better than you care to own. You see my rather brief experience of married life was not of a kind to make me anxious to resume the state. When I married, my husband was a lamb. In a very short time he revealed himself a tiger. There are surprises of that kind, you know, in matrimony."

"Let me humbly beg you to believe that there would be none such with me."

"I've no doubt there would not. Still you're a bit of a firebrand, you know, a revolutionary. Tell me, how is the great cause?"

"In want of funds."

"Naturally, and I've no doubt that those among you who possess some means are asked to feed the treasury."

"Yes, I have to do that copiously, and there are some who say that we should give all earnings above what is required to live on the scale of an artisan."

"And some of you live like princes."

"That is just the difficulty of the situation. But it has been laid down by one of our leaders that as long as we are in a capitalist society, one is bound to live in the manner of capitalists."

"How irksome you must find that rule!"

"You are sceptical, but when the time comes we shall be prepared to sacrifice."

"You, perhaps, because you are so terribly in earnest in whatever you attempt, but not the humbugs in your ranks."

"No, but I hope that we shall root them out."

"Well, well, preserve your faith and do not listen to a woman."

"Ah, but *you* are wise!"

"The women of the coming generation will be wiser."

"If so, there will be an end of what we now call love!"

On this he rose and kissed her hand.

As he was leaving, he turned back. "My new play will shortly be performed. I ask you, as a favour, to come and see it. I think its theme will cause you some surprise, and perhaps explain me better than I can explain myself."

CHAPTER III.

AT Redmont, in a tapestried reception-room looking out on to the park, Robert was holding a meeting of his adherents.

Standing opposite the high window, he leaned against an old oak chair, the strong light falling upon him as he desired that it should. Irlay stood upon his right, and on his left the one-armed Count of Bove, who filled the post of Chamberlain to Robert as he had done to his father, and who lived in permanence at Redmont, in a house on the estate. Next him stood two young men, two brothers named Iliste, who had been sent by their parents to do homage to the potential king, on leaving school. Opposite them, on the other side, was a stout and hirsute man of sixty, named Canor, a Royalist member of the Parliament and the editor of an ancient journal which was falling to decay. Nearer to the window, Viroly stood with Colonel Dax, a middle-aged man of military aspect and scarred face, who bore the title of Master of the Horse, and not far from him were the two Gentlemen of the Bedchamber, both approaching forty, who spelled the office with two more at home with more or less regularity whenever Robert was at Redmont.

This constituted the masculine side of the Court at Redmont at that moment, and Robert was careful that each resident member of it was assigned, as far as possible, the traditional duties of his office. Addressing Canor, he enquired:

"And what good news can you announce, Canor? Has your trenchant pen brought victory at last?"

"Unfortunately no, sire," the stout man replied. "I see great possibilities, magnificent horizons. But the time is not yet ripe."

"It's a long time ripening, Canor."

"Yes, sire. But I count upon your manifesto to produce much good. I'm having it printed in larger type."

Turning to Count Bove, Robert asked: "Is everything ready for the King? I had a letter from him last night. He will be here the day after to-morrow."

"All has been prepared for his Majesty's reception, sire. Unfortunately the season being over, we cannot offer him a shoot."

"He likes to see the country," Robert said, "and he's fond of riding. Has that chestnut mare recovered, Dax?"

"No, sire," the Master of the Horse replied. "During your absence she has grown somewhat worse."

"Very embarrassing," said Robert, who had always been obliged to be economical in horses. "Please wire to the dealer to come here."

Dax bowed and left.

Then Robert spoke to the brothers Iliste, sons of the viscount of that name, and enquired of them how their studies were progressing, and whether they meant to take up politics, listening to their replies indulgently, and telling them to use their best endeavours to persuade their friends to join the cause which he declared was that of real liberty and progress. He spoke for quite five minutes, and his little audience listened to him with profound attention, smiling when he smiled, and growing serious when he set them the example.

When he had finished there was a silence, as on these occasions the etiquette more or less precluded anyone from speaking before he was addressed by Robert. At this juncture, however, there was a knock at the door, which Bove opened. Robert's secretary, Jase, a man of fifty, entered with an air of great solemnity, and informed his master that the Princess desired to speak to him as soon as possible. Robert intimated that he would be with his aunt at once, and presently, after a few words with Irlay as to the plans for the afternoon, he left for the Princess' room. This was situated on the first floor of the country house in the tower, overlooking a fine expanse of country. It was here that the Princess was accustomed to receive her more intimate friends, and it was furnished in the strictest Empire style. As Robert entered, his

aunt was seated in the high-backed chair which she was fond of using whenever there were important matters to discuss. Approaching sixty, with regular stern features and whitening hair, she sat erect and dignified, saying, as Robert kissed her hand:

"My dear Robert, I asked you to come up because I want to speak to you quite seriously about your marriage. While you were away I have not been idle. I have made enquiries and have confirmed my opinion that the Melen marriage is the best that you can make. The dowry is only about a hundred thousand pounds, but there will be considerably more on the death of the present Duke. In this way we shall keep in touch with reigning houses and run no risk of falling into oblivion, a fate which, as you are well aware, is always imminent in our position. There is no great discrepancy of age. She is about five years younger than yourself, and therefore suitable in all respects. I am told she is accomplished, and a great collector of postage stamps. In my view there is no hesitation possible. This marriage offers a solution to a problem which has perplexed me for the last three years. I am convinced that in counselling this marriage I am fulfilling my duty towards our house as well as towards your father, who entrusted me before he died with the task of finding you a wife."

Robert shifted his position on his chair,

coughed, and looked uncomfortable. It was some moments before he spoke. He said at length :

"Have you received the photograph of Princess Maria?"

"No, I did not ask for it. But that is of no importance."

"Oh, but aunt, I think it is of much. I am as desirous as you to act in the best interest of our family, but I should like, in the person I am to marry, at least some element of charm."

The Princess became grave.

"Robert, this is no time to raise difficulties. Your duty lies before you, and you must fulfil it."

"But surely I might be permitted to know more about the lady. Is she tall or short, dark or fair, stout or thin?"

"I did not ask. I have ascertained, however, that her health is good, that she has no physical infirmities. For the rest, she is coming to England with her father in the autumn."

"In that case, we can wait till then."

"No, that is impossible. The Duke of Ralony, with whom I have been corresponding, declares that he must give some intimation of the project to the King, his brother, as there is another suitor in the field."

"Let him have her, aunt!"

This angered the Princess. "I regret you should think fit to treat this matter lightly. I am surprised and pained."

"My dear aunt. On the contrary I think it very grave indeed."

"In that case you think rightly, for you know as well as I that your position is unsound as long as you remain unmarried. In addition to this the dowry is not to be despised, considering your rather narrow means."

"She will spend the interest in dress!"

"Improbable! But even if she did, she would be raising your prestige thereby."

"Well, aunt, there is no hurry for a week or two."

"I'm not of your opinion. The principle must be agreed to now."

"Oh, the principle? Well, well, there's not much harm in agreeing to that. You know our people say that principles are soft."

"But mine are not!"

He merely answered: "No, aunt."

There was a pause, and at length the Princess said:

"I shall write and say that I can see no obstacles of any kind to such a union."

Robert sighed and looked down at the floor. Once again he must submit to the will which had controlled him for so long. He rose and went up to the window.

"Don't you think, aunt, we ought to have the avenue repaired before our guest arrives?"

"No doubt, but the expense would be too great just now. We have to invite so many people to amuse him."

“By the way,” said Robert, with nonchalance, “that Lady Strange, whom you met the other day, is a favourite of his. He would be disappointed if she were not here.”

The Princess glanced at her nephew half suspiciously.

“Is she also a favourite of yours?”

“An acquaintance merely.”

“If we must invite her,” the Princess said, thrown off her guard, “then the sooner it is done the better.”

“I’ll write to her at once.”

This closed the interview. Robert withdrew after enquiring as to his aunt’s plans for the afternoon.

A week later, the house party at Redmont was assembling. In addition to Robert’s “household” and Irlay, it consisted of Mr. and Mrs. Sydney, an Irish peer named Lord Kintyre and his wife, Colonel Ware, a cavalry officer whose father had been a friend of the former Duke, Dalston, a London physician whom the Princess was accustomed to consult, and two English dowagers, somewhat younger than herself, with whom she had long been friendly, finally of Isabel, who had arrived at Redmont an hour previously, and who, in the drawing-room with the other guests, was speaking to the Princess. Isabel was at some pains to enter into the Princess’ favour, and succeeded fairly well. “I

knew your father," the Princess said; "we met upon the Alps, longer ago than I care to remember. And you resemble him. I am glad to see you in this retreat of ours."

Isabel replied: "I am myself delighted," and as she did so she perceived that Robert was observing her from the other corner of the room. Then she spoke with Irlay, and the Colonel for some time, until King Charles arrived.

As soon as his carriage was seen to pass the windows of the drawing-room, Robert and Irlay went out to receive him.

Presently from a motor there alighted a man of forty, with a round and jovial face, blue eyes and brown curled hair. He embraced Robert on both cheeks. "My dear Robert, you're looking supremely well. Conduct me to the dear Princess."

Robert introduced his friend, and the three men entered the drawing-room together. The guests all rose, and the King bowed very low to the Princess and kissed her hand.

"This is a pleasure," the latter said, "which we have long hoped for. I trust her Majesty is well."

"Quite well, Princess, but as usual, not fond of travel. It is I that have the vagrant spirit, as I'm often told at home."

At this the guests all smiled discreetly, and those who were unknown to the King were introduced in turn after the Princess had enquired if

the motor drive from Windsor had been good. As soon as he saw Isabel, the King's eyes beamed with pleasure. He crossed to the place where she was standing and shook hands with her.

"Always that happy smile," he said as he looked into her face. "I remember it so well!"

In spite of her self-possession, Isabel was conscious of a slight embarrassment which increased when she perceived that the guests were looking at her.

"I think," she said, "I can return the compliment," which was indeed the truth.

But presently Robert led away his cousin to his rooms. These were on the first floor, a handsomely appointed bedroom and sitting-room, which had not been used for many years. They looked out on the ornamental lake which, with its swans, formed a feature of Redmont Park.

"Charming!" the King said as he approached the window. "You have a pleasant home, dear Robert!"

"Ah, it is a home of exile!"

Charles turned and contemplated Robert for a moment.

"I suppose," he said with a smile, "you long to be over there and on the pedestal."

"Well, naturally."

"You would like to be an impotentate like me, to sign, approve, ennoble, and appoint as you

are told. Well, my dear Robert, it's not such a privilege as you might think. There are huge *ennuis*. It's true one derives some fun from observing the comic postures of one's fellow men before their fetish, and of course the emoluments of the position are not to be despised; but, oh, it is so difficult to take it seriously and feel oneself authentic. Not long ago I had a conversation with a Socialist. He gave me to understand that we were frauds, and though I let him know I thought his confraternity were shams, I'm not sure who got the better of the argument."

"Oh, but you cannot mean that seriously!"

"As seriously as anything I say. But I perceive you take it all with great solemnity. Perhaps it's just as well, for then you won't get scolded for undue levity as I am. Only if you really want to play the king, you had better lose no time in getting the part assigned to you, because I don't think kings will last. They're too anachronistic."

"They will never die," said Robert with conviction. "I am convinced they are a primordial principle."

Charles opened his eyes wide. "A primordial principle! I am a primordial principle! Thank you, Robert, for the information. That's what I call a mighty phrase. I shall use it on the very next Socialist I meet. It raises me in my own esteem. It gives me a universal sense, it's grand!"

"I'm glad you like it, cousin. Will you have a cigarette?"

Charles gravely accepted the invitation, and they took seats in the window.

"And so you really take it all as seriously as that," the ruler said, "even when we're here together, and there are no listeners! In that case I must be more circumspect. I thought, you know, that *entre nous*—but never mind, we'll talk of something else. Tell me, how are you getting on in life? Is there any marriage in perspective?"

"Yes," said Robert slowly, "my aunt has found a *parti*, but unfortunately I have not yet been able to procure her photograph. Perhaps you have seen her and can tell me what she's like."

"What is her name?" Charles asked.

"Maria of Melen."

A peal of laughter greeted this announcement. Charles held his sides. Then, suddenly becoming serious, he said:

"My poor Robert, you have my sympathy!"

Robert frowned. "I see," he said, "an ogre, I suppose."

"I've never seen an ogre, so I cannot say."

"Confess, now, that she's hideous!"

"I'd rather not, because if it is decreed that you're to marry her, you must, and you and I and all of us will have to make ourselves believe that when we look at her we suffer from an optical delusion!"

Robert heaved a heavy sigh. "That's it. I've got to wed an optical delusion!"

Charles could not suppress a laugh. "My dear Robert, there are compensations for the vagaries of nature. If our wives are not as beautiful as we could wish, other women are, and it's wonderful what virtue is possessed by the ill-favoured."

"Yes," said Robert gloomily, "the virtue of necessity!"

"Cheer up," Charles said, "we're not free men, and we must make the best of it. If we married according to our inclination there would soon be an end of *us*."

"That's true," said Robert thoughtfully, "although it does at times occur that duty and inclination are combined."

"At times, no doubt. There is one such case amongst us in a century perhaps, and if you wait for that, you'll have to come grey-haired to the hymeneal altar, and that the lady won't appreciate, I can assure you."

Suddenly, as he was saying this, he perceived, on the lawn beneath the window, a group of ladies and Isabel among them.

He was silent for a moment, watching her. Robert also watched. "There," said the King at length, "in Lady Strange have you not the perfect type?"

"Oh, absolutely."

"Why, Robert, are there so few Marias of that kind?"

“ Ah, that is the question, why ? ”

“ I answer that it is because we defy the law of natural selection.”

“ Precisely, *Unnatural* selection is what *we* practise.”

“ We’re a poor set, Robert, after all, and our state is not so much to be envied as some think.”

But to this the Pretender was not willing to assent.

“ At all events,” he said, “ it appears to agree with *you*.”

“ Oh, I resolved from the beginning to take things gaily.”

Saying this he rose. “ Let’s join the ladies, Robert, or we shall get morose.”

Robert assented, and they left together for the grounds.

Isabel was walking arm-in-arm with Mrs. Sydney. Charles quickly moved up to her side, leaving his cousin to walk at Mrs. Sydney’s.

“ We saw you from above,” Charles said, “ and as soon as we had seen, we came.”

The ladies were all smiles at this, and Mrs. Sydney said :

“ We were admiring the swans. Are they not superb ? ”

“ Yes,” said the King, “ I have a dark design of stealing one before I leave, if Robert will promise not to put the police upon my track.”

Robert answered : “ In the house over yonder

there are some young. I beg you will accept a pair."

Charles thanked him.

"I shall have them placed upon the stream that flows through my estate, and when I take my morning walk upon the bank, I shall be reminded of you all. See how placidly they glide. Ah, if we could only swim upon the stream of life like that!"

"We can, I think," said Isabel; "so long as the waters of emotion remain unruffled as this lake."

"Yes," said Charles, "but, alas, we can no more control emotion than those swans the winds that blow!"

"It's a question of temperament, I think," Mrs. Sydney said. "What is your opinion, Duke?"

Robert replied with gravity: "It is."

"Now I," continued Mrs. Sydney, "have learnt to conquer my emotions. Perhaps that is because I have so few!"

"Why, Kate," said Isabel, "you actually cried, last time we went together to the theatre."

"Yes, it's curious, the tragic on the stage affects me more than it ever does in real life."

"That is because the tragic in your life has never happened."

"Well, perhaps."

Robert said: "Mrs. Sydney has always led such a pleasant and equable existence, that she

cannot realise the shocks which others have to bear."

But Isabel laughed. "You don't mean to say that they occur to you?"

But he was impatient of even the mildest sarcasm at his expense that day, and he merely answered dryly: "Yes, Lady Strange, occasionally."

At this stage, however, they were joined by Lady Kintyre and the Dowager Duchess of Penrose, and they stood some time in a ring conversing until they all moved to the summer-house for tea with the Princess and the remaining guests. After tea the party returned to the castle. The King monopolised by the Dowager, the Duke by Lady Kintyre walked in front, and Isabel returned with Maud.

The guests retired to their rooms.

It happened that Isabel dressed early that evening somewhat contrary to her habit, and when her maid had given the last touch to her toilette, she left and went down to the drawing-room. Finding no one there, and the evening being fine and warm, she strolled out on the terrace. There she let herself fall into a basket-chair and watched the sun set behind the elms in the castle grounds.

Suddenly she became conscious that the King was at her side.

Standing near to her and looking down into her face, he said:

"I felt a presentiment that I should meet you here, and when I saw you my heart fairly leapt for joy!"

She answered in a low tone: "I, too, was glad that we should meet again after so long."

"To me it seems an age since I was last in England! How radiant you look! How cruel of you not to come to Astia at Christmas!"

"I dared not. I have to think of other things besides my inclination."

"And yet you are so free!"

"Who, in this world, is free? Are we not all slaves to our habits and to the opinion of our friends?"

"When we are under the influence of a great sentiment, we brave all that. For your sake, what is there that I would not brave if the chance was given me? But it is not. You take no heed of what I say. In your letters you are almost cold."

"That is not quite just," said Isabel, a little flushed. "Have I ever ceased to take the warmest interest in you, to give you a woman's advice whenever you have asked it, to show my friendship for you in every way I knew?"

"No, you have not. You have done all that and more. You have warned me of many dangers for which my gratitude is boundless. But, alas, you have never yet relaxed in a certain sense, in your severity towards me. When I am at home, in that old castle in the mountains,

when I am in the midst of the life and bustle of the town, I think of my hard fate, I think of you."

"Nevertheless," said Isabel with a quiet smile, "if rumour is to be trusted, you think of many a fair lady also."

"But not in the same way."

"How many do you favour now?"

"What a question! I am only human! Ah, if it had been my lot to be married to a woman of your charm! I should have deemed monogamy the greatest institution in the world."

"But have you not an admirable consort?"

"Oh, a saint! A pious, noble, admirable woman."

"Who pardons your transgressions?"

"All."

"And tries to make you happy?"

"Yes."

"What more should you desire?"

"You ask me that! Do you not know that in a nature such as mine there is a constant yearning for the affinity which gives to life its zest, and without which it is a dreariness, no matter what the frame may be in which it's set? There are some women who satisfy the aspirations of some men, there are others who do not. These things, I verily believe, are determined when we come into the world."

"There is truth in what you say, but have you not reflected that to give way to affinity, once the

lot of life is cast, is to disturb a series of arrangements on which our society is built, and to cause suffering to those who have relied on our observance of them?"

"No, I have not reflected. I do not reflect. When moved by a great sentiment, I give myself up to it without thought of anything beyond. Only thus is the plenitude of life experienced. Only in this way can we truly live."

"There are some," said Isabel slowly, "whose destiny is never to experience that full sense of existence, for they have to live as their life was cast by circumstance."

"No, they can react!"

"Ah, yes, and if they do society reacts against them. There is no escape from that."

Charles took a seat beside her. "Why *must* you be so wise!"

She did not answer, and he pursued: "Do you know that my chief hope in coming to England was to meet you once again? Do you know that in all my travels I have never met your equal?"

"Then I am afraid you must have gone about the world with your eyes a little shut."

"Even yourself; you satirise!"

"Suppose that I said to you: Will you relinquish all, follow me to the ends of the earth? What would you say?"

"I should say yes."

"Well, well, you might. You are absolute enough for that, but if you did, you would

bitterly repent. Your self-love would receive a blow from which it would not recover. I, in course of time, would fade and cease to please, and then, the throne being lost for ever, you would grow melancholy and rue the day you yielded to affinity."

"What heresy! If you felt towards me as I feel towards you, you could not speak like that. There must be some one more fortunate than I, or I should never hear such words."

He lowered his voice almost to a whisper: "Who is it?"

"No one. There is no one I prefer to you, but even if you were quite ready for the sacrifice, as you may think you are, but as you are not, nothing would induce me to accept it."

Charles lifted up his hands in token of despair. "Truly you are the great enigma of my life!"

"We must live for the day and nothing more," she said.

He accepted this advice quite readily. "Yes, that is it; let us be happy while we may!"

Before she could reply the sound of a footstep caused them to look up. Robert was coming round the eastern gable of the house, and he started slightly as soon as he perceived them. Scanning them rather narrowly, he said: "The evenings grow cold here as the sun goes down. You are in danger, Lady Strange."

And as he said this he glanced at the bare neck and shoulders of his guest. Isabel rose at once.

"I thank you for the warning, Duke, I shall go in."

Saying this, she re-entered the house, accompanied by the two men.

The dinner party that evening was a large one. In addition to the guests staying in the castle, there was a contingent of the residents in the locality, and among them several young girls, whose presence added a note of youth to the gathering. Isabel was next to Irlay, but she was in a position to observe both the King and the Duke. Charles exhibited his usual bonhomie, made jokes and drank freely of the Röderer that was served with the meat in the English way. At times his laugh, which was somewhat loud, would cause Robert to look towards him apprehensively, while the Princess opposite put her glasses to her eyes.

He contrasted oddly with his cousin, whose demeanour was the ceremonious one which he had been long trained to observe on these occasions. Even the Duchess at the side of Charles appeared a little disconcerted at his buoyancy.

"The King is in a merry mood to-night," said Irlay with a smile.

"Yes," Isabel replied, "I like to see him so."

An interminable number of courses, served according to the traditions of the house, caused the dinner to be long protracted. The conversation turned mainly on travel, or on sport, subjects in which the King was excessively well versed.

He heard it said at table that amateur hurdle races had been arranged at a neighbouring village for the following day, and he at once manifested his desire to be present.

"You will see," said Irlay. "His Majesty will astonish the natives if he rides!"

"Will the Duke ride also?" Isabel inquired.

"No, that is against his rules!"

Isabel smiled without replying.

When the dinner was over, the King conducted the Princess back to the drawing-room, and Robert, the Duchess of Penrose, while the remaining guests followed in procession.

Then the men retired to the billiard-room to smoke.

Here Charles was still exuberant, relating some of his mountaineering exploits at the request of Lord Kintyre, and explaining the best way to shoot eagles, Robert's followers listening to him intently, somewhat to the discomfort of Robert, who did not like that all attention should be diverted from himself.

Throughout the evening, however, Charles was the centre of attraction. When they re-entered the drawing-room, he walked up to the piano and began to play, and as he was an excellent musician and had great force of execution, the guests listened with unfeigned attention to his fugues, some of which were of his composition.

Then, when he had finished and a violinist

who had been had from London for the occasion had performed, Charles played bridge with the success for which he was renowned, talking much the while to the discomfiture of the Duchess of Penrose, who played with him. Thus he was fully occupied, and it was only towards the end of the evening that he found time to say a few words to Isabel, who had been engaged in an aimless talk with Irlay and the Doctor.

"I read in your eyes," he said, "that you think I have been too boisterous. But can I help it? I am so glad to be here that my pleasure must find vent."

"Your Majesty is not quite right. I am delighted to observe your zest. It is much too rare to-day."

Charles bowed to her.

"Your indulgence, Lady Strange, is more than I deserve."

"But not more I think than you are accustomed to receive."

Charles sighed. "It is true that people are very good to me."

"Your Majesty knows, no doubt, that good and bad are often exceedingly near neighbours."

"Yes, I have found that so in life."

"So that what appears good is sometimes bad and *vice versa*."

"Yes, but at that rate, we are sure of nothing."

"Of little, certainly."

"And the praise you graciously bestowed upon me, a moment ago, might turn out to be quite negative."

"I should be very sorry if it did!"

This little duel had been listened to with interest by the majority of the guests, who were always attentive when the King spoke. They glanced somewhat disapprovingly at Isabel, who had dared to twit the royal guest, and the Princess held her tortoise-shell *face-à-main* before her eyes for a few moments, while she looked at her. Robert, who was near her, turned and spoke to Lady Kintyre as though he wished to take no notice of the incident.

At eleven the party broke up. The Princess, accompanied by her ladies of honour, two elderly daughters of a count, and the remainder of the guests, withdrew. The gentlemen stayed for some time in the hall and in the billiard-room, chatting and smoking for half an hour.

Then Charles, who never retired early, proposed to his cousin that they should take a stroll, as the night was fine. Robert assented, somewhat against his will, and they left together, after taking leave of the rest.

"I compliment you," Robert said, "on your success to-night. You are always popular."

"Yes, I should have made a pretty good artist for a music hall, I've missed my vocation, I suppose."

"Really," said Robert with a sigh, "it pains me to hear you always disparaging yourself."

"Where is the pain," dear Robert, "in the head or in the heart? as the girl asked in the comic opera."

Robert shrugged his shoulders, and Charles continued:

"You are so deadly serious, Robert. You ought to try to laugh from time to time, just to see if the laughing muscles haven't become stiff."

"It's easy enough, in your position, cousin, to be gay. You would find it difficult in mine."

"Oh, no; for I should feel relieved of a great bother, and able to enjoy myself according to my tastes."

"Not if you had an aunt!"

"Oh, the estimable lady would not trouble me at all."

They reached the lawn which stretched in front of the eastern façade of the castle to the lake, and for some moments they paced up and down in silence in the moonlight. Robert said at length: "If they think that by making laws they can keep me out of Drace, they are mistaken. Would you be surprised to hear I've been there lately?"

"In what disguise?" asked Charles.

"As a commercial traveller."

"What article?"

"Oh, jewellery."

“ And you were not discovered ? ”

“ No, and I held a meeting of my followers in the next street to the Senate.”

“ Well, now that,” said Charles, “ is a piece of fun that never comes my way ! My congratulations, Robert. You’re a hero.”

While Robert had been speaking and Charles replying, a window on the first floor of the building had opened, and a woman’s form was visible in the aperture.

Both the cousins had seen and heard, but neither admitted having done so to the other. Suddenly Robert said : “ The night is colder than I thought. This climate is so changeable ! We ought not to have come out without overcoats.”

Charles answered quickly : “ That is just what I was thinking. If you like we will go in.”

“ Certainly,” said Robert, and they retraced their steps.

In the hall, which was already deserted, they spoke of the arrangements for the morrow, and presently each retired to his room.

Dismissing his valet, Charles reflected for a few moments. Then, after putting on his cloak, he reopened the door and descended the stairs, reaching the hall just as the butler was locking up and turning out the lights.

The man looked astonished when he saw the King.

"My friend," the latter said, "please wait for me awhile. I'm going for a stroll upon the terrace."

"As your Majesty desires," the man said with a low obeisance.

Charles moved round to the eastern gable and stopped beneath the window at which he had seen Isabel. It was still open. He looked around and saw that Isabel's room was isolated somewhat from the remainder of the building, there being only one above it, in which there was no light. It was very unlikely that if he spoke to Isabel, he would be overheard by anyone. But to speak to her, he must draw her to the window.

Accordingly, he adopted the simple expedient of throwing a pebble into the room.

This succeeded, for she came at once. In a loose lace gown, her hair falling over her shoulders, the moonlight playing on her face, she looked still fairer than before.

He said in a low tone: "It's I, returning to do homage!"

"Impudent monarch," she exclaimed, not, however, without a laugh.

"Unhappy, you should say," he murmured.

"Why are you roaming about so late?" she asked. "If you go into the park you may be apprehended as a poacher."

"I trust," he said, "I am not poaching now."

"Not at the present moment, no."

He said: "That's comforting at least. Ah, if you could only come down here!"

"Yes, but I can't, and I wouldn't if I could."

"I know that but too well. Yet if you were willing, I would walk out into the world with you and face it for your sake."

"We would go to unknown lands, do untold things, and come home very penitent."

"No, we would not return."

He raised himself a few feet by stepping upon a stone which was lying on the ground. Then he whispered:

"Meet me to-morrow morning before breakfast in the park, I do entreat you. I want to speak to you in private urgently."

But as he finished speaking, Isabel rapidly withdrew, and, at the same moment, he heard the sound of a footstep on the gravel path, and almost immediately perceived a man's form coming round the corner of the gable. Quickly he descended from his stone. Then he found himself face to face with Robert. For a few seconds the two men looked at each other in the moonlight without speaking. Robert said at length: "So you thought you would take another stroll."

"Quite so," Charles replied, "with an overcoat, this time, like you."

"Yes, one needs one on a night like this."

"I entirely agree with you—entirely."

The sound of a suppressed laugh came from

the room above, but neither appeared to hear it.

"And now," said Robert, "I suppose we will continue our walk."

"Oh, very well," the King replied impulsively, and not without a slight ill-humour, "we will continue."

Upon this they left the terrace and descended to the broad walk leading to the lake.

"What a remarkable woman Lady Strange is," Robert said in a casual manner as they reached the water's edge.

"Extremely so. I hope you're not in love with her, dear Robert."

"And I, on my part, trust that *you* are not."

"Why do you trust not?"

"Because it's love's labours lost."

"If you think that," said Charles, "you will give up labouring."

"And you will do the same!"

"That is supposing your theory is right. But anyway, dear Robert, she's equally inaccessible for both. You have to wed your obligatory Princess, and I have to return to mine."

"You need not remind me of my fate."

"I do so in your interest, dear Robert."

"Thank you for your solicitude, dear Charles."

But Charles took his cousin's arm and, looking at the water, said:

"Don't you think that it would do us good if we took a dip in there? If you like, I'll race you

round the basin, swimming on our backs and looking at the moon."

But Robert shook his head. "We neither of us can afford to catch a chill."

"Ah, I forgot we were august."

They gazed at the silvery streak in silence for some moments. Suddenly Charles burst into a laugh. "Don't you think we'd better go to bed?"

Robert gravely answered, "Yes."

Then they turned again towards the house and slowly retraced their steps, each engaged with his reflections. The light in Isabel's room was out, and when they reached the hall, the butler was asleep in an old oak chair. "This time, my friend," said Charles, as the man woke up with a start, "we've come in for the night!"

"Pleasant dreams, Robert," Charles said, as they parted on the landing, and the Pretender answered, "Pleasant dreams to you."

The next morning Charles rose before six, wrote a few letters, dressed without calling for his valet to assist him, and after lighting a cigar went out into the park.

The morning was bright and fresh. After the clear night a copious dew glistened on the grass and in the trees. Charles, who had slept soundly, felt exhilarated, and amused himself by unloosing the canoe which was moored to the bank of the ornamental water and paddling

about, while keeping his eyes fixed on the window of Isabel's room. He did not know if she would come, as she had not had time to answer him the night before, but he had a presentiment she would.

He was not wrong, for shortly after seven had struck at the village clock, he saw her leave the house and move in the direction of the plantation which extended for some distance at the rear as far as the main road. Leaving his canoe, he set out in pursuit, making, however, a flank movement to allay suspicion in case he had been observed, and he found her, not without some trouble, seated on a rustic bench beneath an oak and reading.

"At last I reach the goal," he ventured.

"I doubt if this is the goal you seek," she said. "I always rise early in the country, and that is why you find me here."

"I had dared to hope that it was in answer to my entreaty just before you disappeared last night."

"Ah, last night! last night! Really it was extraordinarily funny."

"I suppose you had a good laugh at our expense."

"I nearly choked!"

"I hope you don't confound me with that very royal person, whose guests we are, in your hilarity."

"Indeed, I did—though in a minor way."

He took a seat beside her. "I wonder, now, if you would rather that I were not here?"

"You know I'm fond of your society, but I dare not express much sympathy because you are so—enterprising!"

He smiled. "I told you that I wanted to speak to you in private. I wanted to ask you something quite enormous! I wanted to ask you to come and help me put my London house in order."

"Your London house?"

"Yes. You did not know I had one, but I have. It's a small place in a secluded part of Kensington, and I haven't been there for two years. It's full of *bibelots*—and cobwebs by this time, no doubt!"

"I am lost in astonishment," said Isabel, staring at the King. "What *can* you use it for?"

"If you consent to come, I'll show you."

"You know the failing of us women, evidently. All the same, it would not do to rely upon it in the present case."

"Elusive once again," Charles said with a sigh, producing from his pocket a small latch-key.

"Here is the key," he said. "I give it to you to prove that you, and you alone, besides myself, can enter unannounced, since there are but two keys to the door. I shall be there at three o'clock on Sunday next. Come, I entreat you, come!"

Isabel took the key, examined it, twirled it round upon her finger, and returned it.

"Come," he repeated, "I have need of your advice, for I am in a difficult position. My miserly Parliament only allows me a hundred and fifty thousand pounds a year, and expects me to play the King efficiently on that. Of course it's quite impossible, and my account is always overdrawn. If it were not for my good friends, the Jews of Paris and of London, I don't know how I could exist. But Jews, like other men, more than other men, perhaps, have a way of wanting to be repaid at last. In vain I shower orders, even titles, on them: that only stays their importunity awhile. Ah, if I were an autocrat, I should simply pay my debts with a nice little tax on wine, but there's the Constitution, the satanic Constitution that limits me and curbs me! I should like to see one of the demagogues who get up in the Chamber and clamour for a reduction of my income, try to live, on my scale, with my beggarly allowance! He would come to the State for more; but when I knock at the door of the State there is no answer. No matter, I have a scheme, a mighty scheme, to set things right. It's all on paper, and I want to show it to you after my interview with Schillingsheim on Saturday. You see I tell you all my little secrets just to prove that I experience for you that desire to confide which most men feel towards the women they love."

"I feel very flattered that you should seek advice from me, but I am no financier. I can only tell you Schillingsheim's a rogue."

"A perfect type of rogue, I quite agree; but such a useful one! His firm, at home, will lend on twenty-second mortgage."

"Ah, well," said Isabel, "they cannot make you bankrupt!"

"No, I am above the laws."

"I suppose they buy their honours pretty dearly."

"Yes, I dangle them before their eyes until they pay the maximum."

"And how does your nobility receive these new-fledged barons?"

"Many of them are completely in their hands, and as for the rest—ah, well, it teaches them humility and racial tolerance."

"It must, indeed!"

"I see a little blame in those matchless eyes, a slight reproach upon those classic lips. But let me add that much of what I borrow goes to the nation in the shape of gifts. Everybody expects from me subscriptions or donations, and as I give to whoever asks, you see there's not much left for me."

"I know your generosity, but I think if I were in your place, I should order my finances before I gave so indiscriminately."

"You are right, quite right. Ah, if I had you always at my side!"

“ Yes, but that’s—eternally impossible.”

“ Alas! But what is not impossible, but rather very possible, is your coming to take tea with me on Sunday. To that invitation you have not yet replied.”

“ Who is to serve it if the home is empty? ”

“ If you say that you will come, all will be prepared.”

“ I will think it out.”

“ You promise to do that? ”

“ I promise.”

“ Then I suppose I must be satisfied. I rely upon your friendship. I tell myself that you could not find it in your heart to disappoint and wound me, for I know you better than you think. You’re not the callous nature that you sometimes seem to be.”

Isabel took no notice of this remark. She said, after a pause :

“ Your uncle, the Duke Ferdinand, died, I think, some years ago.”

“ Yes, but why do you ask that? ”

“ Merely from curiosity. Did he leave children? ”

“ None.”

“ Are you quite sure? ”

“ Oh, well, of course not,” Charles answered laughing. “ When I said none, I meant, none by marriage.”

“ How many outside marriage? ”

“ I really cannot tell. I never took the

trouble to find out. I believe there were some stories about his amorous adventures."

"Suppose there were a son. What relation would you consider him to be to you?"

"Well, you can't expect me to say 'cousin,' can you?"

"Could you bring yourself to call him stranger?"

"Perhaps not, but a kinsman of a very awkward kind."

"Whom you would not like to receive."

"Well, not exactly."

"Whom you would rank as what the French would term *canaille*?"

"It would depend somewhat upon the mother."

"And supposing she was middle-class?"

"Really," Charles exclaimed, "you speak as if from knowledge."

Isabel repeated her question, and Charles at length replied:

"I often try to think that I am free from prejudice; but when I am asked to be broad-minded, I'm afraid I am restrained by a lot of old ideas. I know I am not, as a rule, orthodox; but in the question of legitimacy, I'm rather strict."

"You think so, but it is not in your power to be strict. Besides, you must reflect that birth is a mere accident."

"Yes, favourable to some, unfavourable to

others. All the same, we must take things as they are."

"Does it never occur to you to try to make them better than they are?"

"No, never. If I began to alter anything that is established, I should get myself involved in many complications, and that I should not like."

"It would not be worth while being King, if there were such annoyances?"

"Precisely."

"Do you know, my royal friend, I sometimes wish that I were Queen—a Queen in my own right."

"What would you do?"

"A great deal which my Ministers would hate, but which my people would appreciate."

"The people? Faugh! they appreciate nothing but glitter and display. When I first began, I had drinking fountains placed about the city. At the present time there is not one of them they have not smashed. But when I drive through the streets in state, they grow excited and shout: 'Long live the King! Long live our Charles!'"

"Of course they do, for some of them are children still!"

"It's singular," said Charles with a comic gesture, "that whenever I try to speak to you of really serious things, we seem to drift away to trifles."

"I don't think that. It's the other way, I fancy."

Without a moment's warning, he seized her hand and raised it to his lips. "It's no use to ill-treat me. That only serves to fan the flame."

She withdrew her hand. "Take my advice, extinguish it."

"I cannot."

"Then let it burn away."

"Ah," he exclaimed; "if you only knew what you miss by this austerity. What is the greatest joy of life, that which makes it so great a privilege, that without which there would be no zest? Is it not love?"

"Do not let us grow poetic; but tell me, will you have time to go to the first performance of a play by a friend of mine on Tuesday next at the Sheridan? I have reason to believe that it would interest you. I ask you to be there."

"If you ask me, I shall go, if the heavens should fall."

"Thank you."

"You say the author is a friend of yours."

"Yes, a friend and nothing more."

"And what is the subject of the play?"

"Oh, that I may not divulge. The title is *The Stigma*."

"Yes, I shall go to see that play."

"And now," said Isabel rising, "do you not think we had better get back to the castle—separately?"

"As you will," Charles said while heaving a

little sigh; "but you know I count upon your coming to my house."

She had already begun to move away, but she turned and said:

"Perhaps."

Taking the path which skirted the plantation, Isabel reached the flower garden, in which the gardener was at work, playing his hose over the grass-plots and causing them to glisten in the sunshine. She asked if she might have a rosebud which had taken her fancy, and as the man was cutting it, she perceived Robert coming up the path.

"I saw you from my room," he said, "and I could not resist the pleasure of coming out to you. Will you allow me to join you in your walk?"

"With pleasure, Duke."

"It is so great a privilege to have you here, I scarcely like to think that, in a few brief days, we shall be losing you. I console myself with the thought that we shall meet again in London soon."

She invited him to the performance of *The Stigma*, and he accepted. Presently he said: "I wonder if I might ask an enormous favour. Will you come and take tea with me one day next week at the flat in Baker Street, which I have lately taken? I have some curiosities collected on my travels that I should like to show you."

Isabel was unable to suppress a laugh.

"Why do you laugh?" he enquired in an injured tone.

"Do you want me to go there alone?"

"Ah, if you only would!"

"Do you know, Duke, you give me a right to be offended?"

He was profuse in his apologies.

"You do not know what I am suffering. I can't help seeing that you don't speak to my cousin in the same tone as you speak to me."

"No, I think I treat you better, on the whole."

"Poor Charles! But, then, he does not take it seriously. He takes nothing seriously, I can assure you."

"But he is so debonair!"

Robert asked: "Do you think that is the chief *desideratum* in a king?"

"I don't know, but it's very pleasing in a man."

Robert assumed his dignified demeanour.

"My character and Charles' are not the same."

"I have observed the difference."

As they were approaching the house, he said: "In there is being formed a plan for my enslavement—a plan which I cannot undo. But before it is elaborated, I can have yet one more spell of liberty. My yacht is waiting at Southampton. If you will come with your friend and with other friends, if you insist, I will take you round the world. In that way I should at least be with you

daily for some months, and who knows what resolution I might take when away from the influence which weighs upon me here."

"The dynasty, Duke Robert, think of that!"

"How cruel of you to remind me of it now!"

"I did so for your good. If I accepted your invitation, the fabric which your aunt is building up would fall to pieces, and your matrimonial interests be spoiled. I wouldn't for the world be the cause of so much trouble. I thank you, but I must decline."

Robert said no more, and they reached the house in silence.

In the morning Robert held his audience as usual, while Charles went down to the village with Irlay to make himself acquainted with the arrangements for the hurdle races. Isabel stayed in with the other guests, and was received by the Princess in her private room.

Then, after lunch, a lunch served with the usual decorum for which the house was famous, the guests all rode or drove or motored to the race-course, about five miles distant.

Isabel journeyed with the Kintyres and the one-armed Chamberlain, in a motor which had been placed at their disposal by some local friends. The King and Robert had ridden over with the neighbouring Squire, and were already on the ground when Isabel and her party took seats on the stand. Charles was in the paddock, in animated conversation with the stewards. He was

wearing in his buttonhole a yellow rose which, as she was well aware, he knew to be her favourite flower. Once or twice he looked up in her direction.

The races were, for the most part, amateur, and were run by farmers of the district and by troopers of the regiment of cavalry which was quartered at the neighbouring town. The expected presence of the King had attracted a considerable number of spectators, and as the day was fine, the scene was not without some animation. The chief event of the afternoon was the gentlemen's race, and as the time approached there was still more animated conversation in the paddock. The Squire, who was to have ridden in this race, and who was named as the prospective winner, had sprained his ankle in getting down the steps of a drag and could not ride, and presently it became known that the King had volunteered to take his place. The announcement was received on the stand with a mixture of surprise and admirative interest, and Isabel could not repress a flutter of excitement as she saw Charles mount a powerful chestnut and ride off amid the cheers of the bystanders. His stoutness rendered his chances of success by no means great, and there were some among the occupants of the stand who murmured that a king might be more fittingly employed. The course was somewhat long, and the competitors occupied some time retreating to the starting place.

At length the horses were seen scrambling over the hurdles, the forms of their riders clearly visible on the sky line. It soon became known that Charles was leading, and as the race approached the excitement grew intense. The last hurdle but one was cleared triumphantly by the improvised jockey, the next rider being more than a length behind, and finally the final obstacle in front of the grand stand was overcome by him in the same way. The King had won! The public cheered till they were hoarse, and Charles, dismounting, bowed to them and entered the enclosure, where he was surrounded by his smiling friends, Robert himself being obliged to congratulate him like the rest.

Suddenly, however, as Charles was complimenting the Squire on the prowess of his horse, he perceived a tall man dressed in black, with a silk hat, who was entering the gate and making in his direction. Stopping at a little distance from the ring, the personage stroked his grey side-whiskers for a moment as he gazed upon the scene.

"Stonor!" ejaculated Charles, suddenly becoming grave, "Stonor!"

The ring opened, and the Prime Minister approached the Sovereign, making a low but formal bow.

"Your Majesty is surprised to see me," the statesman said with a cold smile, "but urgency brought me to London a few days sooner than I

anticipated, and it had compelled me to come here."

"Has anything happened, Count?" enquired Charles.

"Many things are taking place which I should like to discuss at your Majesty's earliest convenience."

Charles heaved a little sigh, and, after introducing Stonor to his cousin and to a few of the notabilities, he signified his readiness to drive back with him. Robert invited the Count to dine at the castle, an invitation which he accepted.

Then they entered a motor and were driven back to Redmont.

At the beginning of the journey neither spoke. Charles was secretly annoyed at having been caught in full frivolity, and Stonor appeared to wish to mark his blame by a preliminary silence. The latter said at length in a tone not altogether free from sarcasm:

"Your Majesty has been victorious this afternoon."

"Yes, Stonor."

"Such contests, although dangerous, tend to preserve the horse from becoming an extinct animal."

"No doubt."

Stonor coughed.

"Passing to more serious considerations, I have to announce that a financial crisis has declared itself of the greatest gravity. The

Government's account at the Bank is low, and the depression of trade is such that it is quite impossible to get advances of the magnitude required. And yet, if we do not soon replenish our coffers, we shall fail to meet our obligations, and sink to the level of an Oriental nation."

"Issue a foreign loan."

"Our debt is so enormous that in the present state of the money market, it would never be subscribed, unless on terms so onerous that our credit would be ruined by the mere fact of granting them."

"Impose new taxes."

"We are already vastly overtaxed, and the people are unable to pay more."

"What then?"

"There is one method by which the situation may be saved, and I am here to explain it to your Majesty."

Charles moved uncomfortably in his seat. He knew from long experience that Stonor's "methods" meant something disagreeable, some limitation of his needs. At length he said:

"Well, Count, what is that?"

"I have reason to believe that I can sell the island of Alentina to a power which would be prepared to pay an exceedingly high price for it to complete its colony."

"But," said Charles in great alarm, "that is my private property. It yields a good share of my income!"

"I am, of course, aware of that, but if a republic were to result as a consequence of our present difficulties, I do not think it would hesitate, for a single moment, to confiscate that property, so that its tenure is uncertain. If by this means we are enabled to tide over our embarrassment, it will be easily possible to augment the civil list: we should be able to use as an argument your Majesty's patriotism in this renunciation. I do not say that the proceeds of this sale would be sufficient, but if we were in possession of them I could then obtain from Schillingsheim a loan upon fresh bonds."

"From Schillingsheim!" the King ejaculated; "why, I am borrowing from him myself!"

Stonor's face became hard set.

"On what security?" he asked.

"On whatever he demands."

Stonor reflected for some moments. He said at length:

"I see that what I have long foretold is inevitable. We must inaugurate the policy of Radical Reform. We must economise in every direction for at least five years, and above all we must have a better understanding with the Crown."

This last sentence was pronounced incisively, and it was now Charles' turn to remain silent.

No more was said until they reached the castle. Then Charles conducted his visitor to the Prin-

cess, who had remained at home. The interview was short and formal, and after it they both withdrew to Charles' room.

Stonor, sitting rigidly in his armchair, began:

"A Spartan economy is the only remedy. In order to set an example, I, for my part, will refuse to take any remuneration for my services until the financial equilibrium is restored. It is the duty of every patriot to do the same. All those who desire their country's welfare must put an iron clasp upon their purse. They must not squander their substance upon idle pleasures and on profligate women. The State, they must remember, has the first claim on their means."

He paused a moment to judge the effect which this veiled sermon had. Then he continued:

"I am not alone in urging the Reform policy with which your Majesty is already acquainted. All my colleagues in the Ministry are with me."

"Stonor," Charles said, in an almost plaintive voice, "are you not exaggerating the gravity of this state of affairs? My experience is that such embarrassments are only temporary, and that things right themselves eventually. It's wonderful how great is the recuperative energy of a country like our own."

"Yes, but this time it will not recuperate, it will simply become bankrupt."

"But, Stonor, a nation cannot be seized and sold up like an individual, or I know one or two which long ago would have incurred that fate."

"No, but a nation can lose credit, prestige, reputation, and as long as I have the honour to serve Astia, that fate shall be averted."

"Ministries come and go," Charles ventured.

"Yes, but debts remain."

"At all events," said Charles, "there is no immediate necessity for taking any step."

"I regret that I am not of your Majesty's opinion! I consider the urgency so great that I have brought with me the deed of sale for signature."

Saying this he produced two parchments and laid them on the table.

Charles lit a long cigar, refraining from even looking at the documents.

"Is there anything else in my possession that would attract you, Count? Why not take the jewels of the Crown at once?"

"Your Majesty must be aware that with the exception of those in our keeping they are for the most part false. His Majesty, your late father, left them so."

"And you never thought it was your duty to replace them?"

"No, I confess that I did not."

"And so you want me not only to part with a portion of my income, but to economise as well."

"That is the unfortunate necessity."

"Did you ever hear of a Brenta economising?"

"No. Your Majesty will have the merit of being the first."

"I cannot do it."

"There is no alternative!"

Charles rose and paced the room. "What I should like to know," he said, stopping, "is who is responsible for this state of things."

"Mainly the bad administrators of the past."

Charles took a few more paces. Then he said:

"At all events, there is no need that these papers should be signed to-day. I desire to reflect."

Stonor produced from his pocket another paper on which was written:

"We, the undersigned, members of the Cabinet, support the proposition of Count Stonor relative to the island of Alentina."

Then followed the signatures of the ten Ministers. Stonor handed the paper to the King, who read it ruefully, and then for a moment glanced towards the table.

Silently Stonor drew from his pocket a stylographic pen, and equally silently presented it to his master. Charles took the instrument and balanced it for some moments between his fingers. Then he said:

"I will sign this on one condition: that the State purchases from me, for one hundred thousand, my castle in the Neve as an historical museum."

Stonor lifted up his hands. "It was the State itself that gave it to your Majesty!"

"I'm well aware of that, but what is given me I have as great a right to sell as the State has to take from me what I inherited."

"I could never propose a measure of that kind."

"Then, Count, I cannot sign. I should be ruined."

"Does your Majesty think that we, the staunch supporters of the monarchy, would permit the Sovereign to want?"

"Not daily bread, perhaps."

"Or that we should fail to make provision for the proper maintenance of the throne?"

"You talk, Count, as if I were an institution, but before I am an institution, I would beg you to remember I'm a man."

A faint smile passed for an instant over the countenance of the Minister.

"Your Majesty has no need to remind me of that fact."

Still the King hesitated, playing with the pen. Stonor at length rose.

Drawing out his watch, he said: "It is now just half-past six. I leave your Majesty to your reflections. In an hour I shall call again for the completed documents."

He withdrew, and Charles was left, as the Count had said, to his reflections.

They were not of long duration, for presently

he quitted his room and descended to the terrace, where he waited for some time the return of the party from the races. Ah, Stonor! That man would be his death! When had he ever been able to resist the mandates of that will? "

At length the sound of motors came from the park gate, and soon the guests arrived. As they saw Charles they congratulated him upon his victory, and Isabel, especially, was at pains to compliment him on his skill.

Keeping her engaged in conversation until the rest had left, he whispered, "Come and sit a moment on the terrace." She complied with his request, and rapidly he related to her his interview with Stonor and the sacrifice which was demanded of him, asking her advice.

"Do what he asks," she said at once. "Stonor is a man who makes no unwise proposals, and he may well be trusted to fulfil his promise of providing for the throne. For the rest, there appears to be no alternative. Of course I know that the régime of economy which the Count desires will be very irksome to a temperament like that of his Majesty of Astia, but what is to be done? There is no law to necessity!"

"Then you advise me to go in and sign?"

"I do."

"Very well. The thought that I am following your counsel will make the privations easier to bear, and then I have no son for whose future to

provide. My wife has thought fit to present me with nothing more than girls."

Isabel laughed. "And after this is done," she said, "if you don't consider you are treated well, ask my advice again."

"That I will, I believe you equal to any Stonor."

He whispered in her ear, "I love everything in you—your mind, your grace, your beauty!"

Then he rose, returned to his room, and signed.

At dinner that evening, Stonor was placed upon the right of the Princess and Isabel was opposite to him.

Grave as usual, he spoke with measured words, and his presence seemed to lend a more than usual seriousness to the repast. Now and then his eyes would rest on Isabel, who appeared to interest him somewhat, probably because she was the only woman in the room who could sustain her part with credit to herself whenever the conversation rose higher than the ordinary themes. And when the King spoke to Isabel, Stonor's glance would go from one to the other rapidly and then pass on to Robert, who was seated opposite his aunt and attending, as he always did on these occasions, to his duties as the host. After the dinner was over Stonor, who had half an hour to spare before leaving for the station, said a few words to Isabel in the drawing-room, or rather he asked her a few questions. How long was it since she was last in Astia? When

did she propose to do his country the honour of visiting it again? To what family did she belong? Was her home in London? To which questions Isabel replied without circumlocution.

After he had left, carrying with him the signed deeds, and agreed with Charles to meet in London on the Monday, Charles challenged Isabel and Robert to a game of billiards. Accordingly they retired to the billiard-room, where the King had little difficulty in beating his two adversaries, notwithstanding that Isabel played well and Robert was no mean stroke.

The King was sufficiently light-hearted.

"Did you not think, Robert," he said laughingly, "that the Count was extraordinarily unbending to Lady Strange?"

"No doubt," the answer was, "he felt the influence which we all feel."

"Which we all feel!" Charles repeated; "which we all *must* feel."

The King made a long break. Then he resumed:

"When you, Robert, are on the throne of your ancestors, that throne, you know, to which you so much aspire, you will do well to seek among the ladies of your court, a Lady Strange, if there be another such, and let them learn wisdom from her. Stonor himself is not more wise."

"I have observed," said Robert, "the gift of discernment which Lady Strange possesses in so great a measure."

But Charles laughed freely.

"Why, my dear Robert, you speak, as we say at home, just like a book."

Robert did not smile, and it was evident that he was little pleased to be reminded of his formality. Isabel, who had been playing with her cue, remarked:

"I should not like my little intentions to be dignified by the name of wisdom."

"But," Charles said, "they deserve to be so called. How unconscious of your qualities you are! What a lesson you could teach to some of us at home!"

"But I don't want to teach lessons. I am no teacher, I simply want to be what my maid calls a private lady."

"Bravo," said the King laughing, "a private lady. I often wish that I could call myself 'a private gentleman.' Don't you, Robert?"

"I can't say that I do."

"Oh, no, excuse me, I forgot," and Charles glanced at Isabel with a twinkle in his eye.

"The advantage of not being in my capacity, dear Robert, I may tell you, is that you are at least able to call your own your own. Whereas, were you on your ancestral pedestal, you would find that what was yours was the State's, and what was the State's was the people's."

Robert smiled sceptically, and Isabel said: "As long as your country was hard up and you still wished to reign."

"A very good way of putting it!" said Charles, and Robert answered: "I am bold enough to think that my country would never get into that condition."

"No," said Charles with a shade of irony, "you would make laws to prevent it."

"National prosperity," suggested Isabel, "by act of Parliament."

"Prudence," suggested Robert, "by the example of the King."

Somewhat beaten in the argument, Charles dropped it, and the game continued, at which he was victorious.

Then some of Robert's household came, and before a new game began, Isabel withdrew.

The ladies in the drawing-room were discussing Stonor, of whom all appeared to disapprove. The Princess enquired her opinion of the statesman, and she replied: "A very astute, far-seeing man who is sent by Providence to rule."

"To rule?" enquired the Princess.

"Ah, yes," said Isabel with a quiet smile, "I forgot, the King does that. Well, then, to direct."

"A distinction without a difference."

"I'm sorry," said Isabel, "but I cannot put it differently, and with your permission, Princess, as I am tired, I will retire."

The next day being Sunday the King was astir early, and went to the church at Chiston, accompanied by Robert, who never missed an

opportunity of affirming his support of religion.

On the return journey Charles asked: "Do you believe all that we've just been hearing?"

"Of course," Robert replied in a tone of surprise. "Don't you?"

"Of course, of course—naturally. The worst of it is I have a wretch of a bookseller who sends me everything those scientific people write about our origin, and you know, Robert, one gets a trifle shaken in one's faith in miracles after reading their books."

But Robert had the faculty of non-analysis.

He said: "That does not trouble me. I place my trust in the teachings of the Church."

"What a wonderful capacity you must have, Robert, for believing!"

"Yes, and I deem myself extremely fortunate in having it."

During the day neither cousin found much opportunity to speak to Isabel, who stayed with the ladies and went to church with them. In the evening, however, after dinner, as the night was warm, nearly the whole party stayed out on the terrace and listened to the performance of a Russian violinist who had been invited down for the occasion.

Charles, in a recess near to Isabel, whispered in her ear:

"At —— Ormonde Square at three on Wednesday."

"Very well," said Isabel with unconcern, "I shall be there."

Charles glanced at her with a slight expression of surprise, as though he did not expect so ready an assent to his proposition, but he went on smoking without more whispering lest they should be observed.

When the music was over, the Chamberlain told hunting stories of the time when he was young and vigorous, and the ladies, including the Princess, listened with indulgence, for the old man was apt to be somewhat tedious and repetitional. Irlay was busy paying court to the sister of the Squire, Miss Bellew, who had been dining at the castle, and Robert was engaged in a discussion with Lord Kintyre on the labour question, on which, as a prospective ruler, he had provided himself with a useful set of views. The editor of the Royalist journal joined in this, and contrived to give his own opinions without appearing to contradict any that his Prince had offered; for Robert was always standing on his dignity, and did not suffer contradiction from his followers.

"I am convinced," said Lord Kintyre, not without a little malice in his tone, "that when you obtain your rights, you will settle the question over there, and we shall be glad to imitate."

Robert, who took such compliments as serious, was seen to bow.

"That form of flattery," he said, "I should

indeed appreciate," and Charles, who had overheard, was obliged to strain every muscle of his face to prevent himself from laughing. He would have liked to continue his duo with Isabel, but it was not long before he found himself surrounded by many of the guests secretly desirous to obtain his friendship and to receive an invitation from him when they visited his capital. The supporters of the Pretender, who were also anxious to add to their collection of foreign orders, were assiduous in paying deference to him, so that although he wished them far away as his face almost betrayed, at times, he was obliged to act his part of gracious sovereign towards them.

Before the party retired for the evening, however, Charles found an opportunity to say to Isabel as she was going up the stairs :

" I shall only live for our meeting."

" Oh," said Isabel, " I hope your Majesty will live for a great deal more than that !"

Before he could reply she had glided swiftly up the stairs and disappeared.

For a moment he stood irresolute, as though he would have followed her ; but he was recalled to a sense of things by Robert, who had observed the scene and who placed his hand upon his shoulder.

" My dear cousin, would you not like a glass of sherbet or some other cooling drink before you seek your couch ?"

" No, thank you, Robert. For the present I am not in need of it. At the same time, Robert,

I *do* think it would be good for *you*. You seem to be rather flushed."

Robert merely answered: "Good night, cousin, pleasant dreams."

"Good night and pleasant dreams to you!"

The next day after breakfast, Charles left for London, but before leaving he saw the Princess in her private room, and there he was asked to use his influence to persuade Robert that the projected marriage was the best and only one he could contract, and to induce him to believe that the bride would improve in personal attraction, as her family had always done, as they advanced in years. Taking Robert aside, therefore, after lunch, with a semi-comic gravity he exhorted him to do his duty like a man, and to think of the future of his race.

"Yes," said Robert, when he had finished, "you talk as my aunt has prompted you. But do *you* think of the future of *your* race?"

"Not often. There are so many whose concern it is. In reality, my poor Robert, I sincerely sympathise with you. But what is to be done? Are we like other men? Are we not the puppets who dance to the strings that others pull? If we don't do what is expected of us, we shall lose our posts, and I, at all events, should not like to do that. I don't see how I should earn a living unless it was as a street musician, and at that, I think, I should grow thin. Suppose, now, you were to say you would follow your

inclination, and your inclination led you to the shrine of a divinity we know, what would be the result? You would miss the chief chance of your life, and as you couldn't wed the lady, even if she would consent to wed you, you would be in a very queer position, my poor Robert."

"Much the same as that in which you would find yourself, dear cousin, if you worshipped at the self-same shrine."

"I agree with you entirely."

"Well, then?"

"Well, then, Robert, I must be going. My train is due at eleven-ten."

Robert smiled and joined the party of his adherents who were to accompany the King to the railway station. In less than half an hour, Charles had turned his back on Redmont and was on his way to London. Isabel, however, did not leave till the afternoon, and when the lunch was over, as there was an hour to spare, Robert entreated her to take a walk with him. She yielded somewhat reluctantly, and they went up to the seat where Charles had overtaken her two mornings previously.

Almost immediately and without warning, he exclaimed:

"I want to ask you to tell me whether I displease you, whether I am hateful in your sight."

"Oh, my dear Duke," she protested; "how could you imagine any such improbable contingency?"

"I only judge that you repel me whenever I attempt to gain a place in your affections, and yet heaven knows I am in love to the extent of desperation."

He looked in earnest, and Isabel was struck with his expression.

"I have for you," she said, "the greatest of regards. I have told you that before. Surely you do not wish me to repeat it."

"Always that cold word! But from you I would accept even coldness if you would only be my wife! Since yesterday I have been revolving a project in my mind. If you will consent, I will force my aunt to accept you as my consort. Oh, it will not be easy! Her opposition will be fierce at first, for she wishes me to marry a princess of the blood. But I will make bold to overcome it for your sake. For you I would do anything! Did not the third Napoleon ally himself with a Spanish countess? It is true that was because no reigning house would give him one of their daughters, but no matter, what he did I am prepared to do!"

"What a colossal error you would make! You know as well as I, Duke, that commoners like me are deemed eternally unfit for royal ranks! The liquid in our veins is chemically the same, no doubt, as yours; but theoretically it's different. If looked at through a microscope, it's similar, but yet in the minds of men, it's not. How are we to explain these contradictions? We can't,

and it's better not to try. It's very flattering to me to receive such offers, but if my feelings towards you were ever so much more tender than I am able to say they are, I could not do as you propose."

"I will not take that as a final answer."

"I think you should."

"At all events I shall see you shortly at the theatre."

"Yes, and I want you to applaud."

"That I shall, even if I should feel jealous of the author."

"He has much talent."

"Have you known him long?"

"Six years."

"I feel that I should like to kill him."

Isabel laughed. "If we lived in the sixteenth century, I think it probable you would."

"We have the same instincts now as then, only we do not so often act upon them."

"Fortunately, Duke."

"Ah, those were the times when men obtained by force what they could not get by suasion."

"In those times you would have abducted me, I do believe."

"I should have placed you on my charger and ridden to the far ends of the earth."

"Ah, yes. The horses in those days were stronger than they are now."

"You mock me always, yet I remain your

slave, I cannot take a resolution never to set eyes on you again."

"Oh, that would be unkind."

"It would cause you no regret."

"I am by no means sure of that."

He moved closer to her, and would have taken her hand had she not withdrawn it.

"If I could but see a spark—one single spark," he said.

"My dear Duke, you distress me. Why seek what should not exist?"

"Should not?"

"Could not, if you like it better."

Robert sighed. "I wonder if you realise the wounds which you inflict."

"No," she said with conviction, "it's singular I don't. I say to myself that they are really for your benefit."

"Do you say the same to my cousin?"

"No."

"And may I not ask why?"

"Because, as I said before, he isn't half so serious."

"That is an advantage in your eyes?"

"I think it is. You see I'm rather serious myself, and I'm fond of contrasts."

"Peuh, Charles is a buffoon!"

A frown appeared upon her forehead.

"I object," she said. "I think it very ill of you to speak of him like that!"

"I cannot help it. Pray forgive me."

"Not unless you retract that word."

"Very well, I do. If you like we'll call him a model King."

"He's better than you seem to think."

"How you love to praise him!"

"He is a good fellow."

"And what besides?"

"That is sufficient."

Robert bowed.

"And now," said Isabel, "as my train won't wait, I must return to get ready for the journey. I'm glad we've had this little conversation, because it allows us to understand each other better."

"It makes me just a little more despondent than before."

"You'll easily get over that. Take exercise, play golf, Duke, and be optimistic."

"Much cause have I for optimism," he murmured as they walked along; "duty, nothing but plain duty, stares me in the face!"

"If the duty is plain, the road to it is straight."

"Oh, yes, it's plain, it's *very* plain!"

Isabel could not suppress a laugh. "Ah, well, we cannot control circumstance!"

They reached the house. She ascended to her room, and presently, after taking leave of the Princess, who, though cordial, made no allusion to another visit, she left for the station accompanied by most of the ladies with whom she was a favourite, and by Robert and Irlay.

CHAPTER IV.

IN her box at the Sheridan Theatre, Isabel, accompanied by Maud, was watching the filling of the stalls. Presently, after a knock, the door opened and Vincent entered.

"I have found a moment," he said, "to thank you for coming to support me. I am venturing out of the beaten path to-night and risking much. But the play had to be written to relieve my mind of certain thoughts, and whatever the consequence may be, I'm glad I wrote it."

"Do you know," asked Isabel, "who is to occupy the next box to this?"

"No, I have been away from the theatre for the last few days."

"The King of Astia."

Vincent started. "Is his presence in any way connected with your visit to his cousin?"

"Yes, I have asked them both to come."

"And did you tell them the nature of the piece?"

"No, you said in your letter that it was about a prince's son, but I did not tell them so, or they might have hesitated, and I wanted them to come to receive a lesson, for a lesson I imagine the play to be."

Vincent reflected for some moments.

"It was a rather bold thing to do, but I'm glad you did it."

"The lesson is not too strong, I hope."

"You shall soon judge."

"Of course you are coming to sup with me at the Odelian?"

"Alone with Miss Sinclair?"

"No, I have a little party. Come."

"I shall."

He left, and Isabel continued to survey the house which by this time was nearly full. Presently she saw Robert take his seat in a modest stall. He looked around, as she knew, in search of her, and bowed when he perceived her.

The orchestra commenced the *Invitation à la valse*, and had nearly finished it when suddenly all eyes among the audience were turned upon the adjacent box to Isabel's. Charles had just arrived. Then the music ceased and the curtain rose. The play depicted the career of the natural son of a prince, a cavalry officer, who, bearing the stigma of his birth, resorts to dishonourable means to obtain money for his pleasures, and who has ambitions due to his heredity. He is finally suppressed by the husband of the woman who had sacrificed herself for him, but whom he had abandoned. After the first act, Charles, who was attended by his equerry, Count Iffusy, applauded for a moment, then he rose and left his box and knocked at Isabel's.

Isabel rose as he entered. He bowed profoundly.

"You see," he said, "I've kept my promise. I'm here to witness this performance."

"It's charming of you, sir."

"Oh, *please*, not that formality, or I shall cease to feel we're friends, but tell me who is this young officer we've just seen on the stage supposed to be."

"I cannot say. The author has not told me."

"Well, we must wait and see how the play develops." He addressed a few words to Miss Sinclair. Then he said, in a low tone to Isabel: "In four days I return! To-morrow morning I have an interview with Schillingsheim, and another in the afternoon—you know with whom!"

"Beware of Schillingsheim!"

"But the business is almost concluded."

"Cancel it."

Charles was about to reply when an authoritative knock at the door of the box caused him to look up.

A tall man entered, stern and diplomatic, with an order on his breast.

"Stonor!" Charles ejaculated, frowning.

After bowing to Isabel and Maud, Stonor said: "Iffusy told me that your Majesty was here, and as Lady Strange and I have met before, I ventured to present myself."

"What is the matter now, Stonor?" Charles asked in a tone that betrayed annoyance. "Have

the members in the Chamber been having an epic combat, or is the Government defunct?"

"Neither, I am pleased to say. I came because I am leaving probably to-morrow, and wanted to spend at least another evening with your Majesty."

Charles coughed. This sociability on the part of Stonor was of a suspicious character. Stonor was known to have no love for the theatre, and to have said on one occasion that dramatists were social pests, and that actors were their puppets.

"I'm afraid, Count," said Charles, "you'll not enjoy the piece. It's clever, but not in your style, you know."

"As a general rule," said Stonor, "one piece amuses me about as much as another, I believe."

"Which probably means," said Isabel, "that none have that effect."

"I should not care to affirm so much," said Stonor. "I remember a play which was an exception. It was all about two inebriates of love, who reasoned like two hares, and got shot as though they had been such."

"A hardened celibate like you, Stonor," said the King, "never has experience of the lover's state of mind."

"Fortunately, I think, for my mental comfort."

The orchestra had begun the overture to the second act, and Charles rose. "If you like, Count, we will go back to my box."

Stonor took leave of Isabel with an air of slightly ironic deference, and the two men left.

After the second act both the King and Robert found themselves again with Isabel. The public had not yet given many signs of their approval, and seemed uncertain as to the intentions of the author. Robert declared that the hero was ridiculous, although he gave no reasons for his judgment. He was morose, and sat in the rear, allowing Charles to talk, his eyes fixed on Isabel, who glanced at times in the direction of the door. Vincent, however, did not appear, and at length the curtain rose again, just as the King and Robert withdrew.

After the third act the house was silent. The theme was somewhat displeasing to the audience, and many of the occupants of stalls and boxes cast furtive glances in the direction of Charles' box. But Charles had withdrawn into the rear and was invisible.

Stonor was the personification of cold blame.

"I am unable to understand that your Majesty should have been advised to come to such a play as this."

"I don't quite understand myself," Charles said in evident annoyance.

"Does your Majesty propose to stay?" the Minister enquired.

"I cannot say. I must see Lady Strange at once."

Almost imperceptibly, Stonor shrugged his

shoulders, and the King went out. The next moment he was in Isabel's box.

"My dear friend," he said deprecatingly, "why *did* you want me to see this play?"

"Because I thought you might like to see such a presentment."

"Ah, well, to you one must pardon everything; but Stonor's furious."

"He may leave if he doesn't like it."

"And the same remark, I suppose, applies to me."

"I should be sorry if you did not stay."

"But the Press! What will they say to-morrow?"

"The Press in England is discretion itself where a royal person is concerned."

When the curtain fell on the last act there were cheers from one part of the house and expressions of dissent from the remainder. It was evident that the author had given more of an illustration than a play, and this did not meet with the approval of the lovers of dramatic art. The aristocratic portion of the house were shocked. The moral of the play was that irresponsibility, even that of princes, works evil in the world, and this was applauded by the large Socialist contingent in the gallery. Isabel and her friend left at once, as also did the King, and they met in the corridor. Stonor, with an expression of anger on his face, passed along with a mere inclination of his head as he perceived Isabel. No one spoke

descending the stairs, and they were joined by Robert in the vestibule. Together the party proceeded to the restaurant, where a private room had been reserved.

Mr. and Mrs. Sydney were already there. But covers had been laid for seven, and they waited before sitting down until the seventh guest arrived.

It was Mrs. Sydney who enquired of the King his opinion of the piece. But he appealed to Robert, saying :

"What do you think of it, Robert? Your opinion will, I'm pretty sure, be mine."

But Robert, glancing at Isabel, replied :

"I should prefer not to express it."

"Very well," said Isabel, "it's clear that you don't approve of it. All the same, as a study of consequences, I think you must admit it's skilful."

There was a dead silence.

At last Mrs. Sydney came to the rescue with :

"There's no doubt that some of the situations were dramatic."

"Melodramatic," Charles said with a smile.

"That, at least, is an opinion," Isabel remarked.

"Of no importance," Charles explained.

"I don't think," Mrs. Sydney said, "that Mr. Vincent has given us his best work in this play."

"That seemed," said Charles, "to be the feeling of the house."

"I wish," said Isabel, "that he had not been quite so ultramontane, because I should have liked to discuss the characters, and now I scarcely dare."

"I can understand," said Charles with a significant expression, "how difficult you find it."

Charles was not fond of standing on his dignity, but he appeared to be inclined to do so now. Isabel seemed to realise the awkwardness of the situation keenly. It was evident, however, that she intended to brave it out. Presently the door opened and Vincent entered. His face was pale, and the features somewhat drawn. Isabel presented him to the King at once as the author of the piece they had just witnessed. Vincent, as he bowed, gave a sustained glance at Charles, who, indeed, resembled him remarkably. Then he was introduced to Robert and the Sydneys. After the introduction there was an awkward silence, no one finding the right subject to discuss. It was ended by Isabel, who proposed that they should take seats at the supper-table.

When this had been done, she directed the conversation away from plays and theatres on to the current topics of the town. It was not very long, however, before Robert brought it back to the play of the evening.

"I understand," he said, addressing Vincent, "that you are the author of *The Stigma*."

Vincent assented gravely.

"Then I should be very much obliged if you would tell me, should the question not be indiscreet, whether the hero of it is drawn from life or whether he is quite fictitious."

"He is not drawn from life, in a concrete sense," said Vincent. "Nevertheless he is the embodiment of observations on the tendencies of men in his position."

"I am much obliged for the information. Opportunities for observing such individuals have not hitherto been granted to me, so I did not know. What I cannot help remarking is that a Socialist, as I understand you to be, should have had an opportunity of observing a type which *I* have never seen."

Vincent did not reply, but Isabel retorted:

"You forget that a writer can see far."

"Don't you think," said Mrs. Sydney, who had been observing the gathering expression of annoyance on the King's face, "that we had better discuss the weather than lose ourselves in labyrinths like these?"

The proposal was accepted readily, and the conversation was deflected. Nevertheless the atmosphere remained electrical, and although Isabel made several attempts to enliven the chat of the supper-table, a *gêne* was felt all through the meal.

It was not that Charles refrained from making a few jests, but he did so with an air of half-ironical aloofness which did not pass quite unperceived.

Towards the close, however, Charles suddenly reverted to the early topic, after a German play had been discussed.

"It has often seemed to me that a stigmatising author should at times depict himself upon the stage. In that way the stigmatised would be able to compare themselves with the stigmatiser. What is your opinion, Mr. Vincent?"

"I know of no reason why he should not, unless it be that the lives of playwrights are often too uneventful and uninteresting to be worth depicting."

"Oh, but his failings may be interesting—his deviations from the path of virtue, let us say."

"Well," said Vincent with assurance, "I should not shrink from placing myself before the public with all my faults, if I thought the public would be interested in them."

"Bravo," said the King, "that's quite heroic."

"I think," said Mrs. Sydney, "that Mr. Vincent has already put pieces of himself into his plays."

"Indeed!" said Robert quickly, "and may we know if there are any in the play we have just seen?"

But before Vincent could reply, Isabel, who had seen the danger, answered: "No, Duke, we may not. We must restrain our curiosity. Stagecraft has secrets which it is not advisable to probe."

"I see," said Robert with an enigmatic smile, and again the conversation changed to other themes.

When the supper was over, there was a competition between Charles and Robert for the privilege, as they expressed it, of driving Isabel and her companion home by motor. Charles said it belonged to him by right of seniority, but Robert asserted that he had a prior claim on account of his having asked the honour first, and finally, Isabel decided that she would trouble neither, but would drive home in her own brougham, which was quite fast enough for her.

It happened, however, that Charles' and Robert's carriages both came up before Isabel's. Therefore, as the Sydneys accepted to be driven home, Isabel was eventually left in the vestibule with Maud and Vincent, who had lingered to the last.

"Come back with us," said Isabel, "I have something to say to you."

Vincent accepted the invitation, and presently they drove away together.

"Now I want to tell you," Isabel commenced, "that your play wasn't worthy of you. It was a too evident attack upon those people who, after all, are not the only ones who are responsible for irregularities. The King is more vexed than he had the sense to show, and the Duke is really furious. I shall be blamed for having been the

means of inducing them to come. The lesson was too strong."

"I am sorry if you should be troubled by the fact that it has hurt their feelings, but do you not think that men who are upon that pinnacle should at least observe their marriage vows? If an ordinary citizen live polygamously, and have two families, it is accounted scandalous, but if a king does that, the matter is condoned. And I say this double-scale morality is debasing to a nation, and it needed to be pointed out how bad is the lot of these kings' sons, and how easily they become rascals."

"But many of them have been made dukes and led the most enjoyable of lives. Even under the third Empire in France they were not absent, so that you cannot generalise, I think. As to the moral superiority of kings, surely you know the precept that the king can do no wrong. It's still in force, I can assure you. In sex morality it's the king's temperament which sets the standard. If the king is strict, the nation is, or pretends to be, the same. If the king is lax, the nation follows his example. Servants copy their masters; subjects imitate their king!"

"And does not that appear to you as the most abject of conditions for a nation to be in?"

"It might be if I took things seriously, but you see I don't. And, after all, I am a woman, and, therefore, inclined to believe in the inevitability of ancient institutions."

"That is a belief I cannot share."

"Perhaps if you could you would find life easier."

"Surely you do not mean to say one should suppress conviction simply for the sake of greater ease!"

"No, not entirely, but you should not let it take away the pleasure of existence, because I think you'll find, if you have not found it out already, that very few men in the world are really sincere in what they say are their convictions, and you who are run the risk of being left alone some day when you least expect it. Take the Socialists, for instance. How many are consistent or have the fervour you display? Why, in this country, if a Socialist republic were at any time established, they would ask a member of the reigning house to head it."

"That is not impossible," said Vincent almost to himself.

"So you see, my worthy Robespierre, it's better to take life as a comedy and gain amusement from its contemplation than to cavil at its folly and injustice."

"Would you really prefer to see me destitute of higher aims, a mere pleasure-seeker, like those two men we have just left?"

"Oh, but they consider they are something more than that. They think themselves industrious in their country's interest."

"But you do not think so, do you?"

"I'm afraid I haven't formed a definite opinion."

Maud said: "King Charles is supposed to be overwhelmed with work at home."

"I have no doubt," said Vincent, "that he signs his name a great many times a day."

"That is cynical, my dear Vincent, and you know that cynicism cannot alter facts."

"How readily you take their part."

"I am always told that I never take a part."

They reached the house of Isabel.

"Good-bye," she said, as she held out her hand to him, "and don't do it again. Your reputation has already suffered."

The next day towards three o'clock, Isabel, accompanied by Maud, set out on foot for the address which Charles had indicated.

When they reached the street, Isabel asked her companion to wait for her outside the house. When she had been there half an hour, she was to knock at the door, bringing the telegram which had arrived for her before they started, and this Maud promised faithfully to do.

The door was opened by an aged woman of foreign aspect, who requested Isabel to enter a room on the ground floor.

Here, in the midst of books and works of art, she found the King. He sprang to his feet as soon as she entered, and would have caught her in his arms had she not eluded him by a side movement.

"I have come," she said, "to see your collection and for nothing else."

"My collection! here it is, in this room, and all about the house. I amused myself by making it during my visits to this wonderful city, but now that you have come, it sinks into insignificance. It seems a sin to waste the precious moments that we have together in looking at *bibelots*."

"Of what then shall we talk—of Stonor?"

"Oh, Stonor is still furious. He says that play was an insult to me, that the author is a fool."

"And what is your Majesty's opinion?"

"Oh, well, if he was the friend of anyone but you, I should call him something worse, but your friends are privileged, as you are privileged. To you I would forgive everything. But why are you still so hard? Why will you torture me? Your severity will make me mad."

"In that case," said Isabel half rising, "I think I'd better go before it is too late."

But he jumped to his feet, seized her hands, and forced her to resume her seat.

"See here," he said, taking an ivory image from a shelf. "Look at the Buddha, placid and calm and patient. You'll transform me into a Buddha soon, and then you'll laugh at my placidity!"

"Rather I should admire your self-control."

"Listen," he said. "I'm serious, very

serious. I want you to reflect whether it is kind, whether it is human to treat me thus! Ah, if I could only find the words or know the acts that would propitiate you!"

"I think you're much more likely in your present frame of mind to find the ones that won't."

In despair he returned to the subject of his collections. Holding up a plate of old Swansea china, "There," he said, "that is my conquest of to-day. It took me the better part of the morning to find that, and I discovered it alone in a shop in Kensington. I escaped from Stonor for the purpose. By this time he is no doubt searching for me everywhere. But he does not know of this retreat. No one but you know where I am at present, and I love to think that that is so."

Isabel admired the plate, and, after turning it over in her hands and examining the mark, she said:

"It was worth while spending some time to find this rarity, of course. But tell me, what about your interview with Schillingsheim?"

"I remembered what you said, and made conditions in my favour. He was surprised, but yielded, thinking, I suppose, he would do better another time. So that I owe the advantage gained to you."

"I am somewhat sceptical," said Isabel laughing. "I doubt whether the advantage is a real one. A man like Schillingsheim does not give anything away."

"Not generally, but I dangled the usual bait before his eyes."

"And will you give a title to such a wretch?"

"Not if I can help it."

"Ah, that is bad, bad policy. It is a policy of compromises. In that way you lose authority, you lose what you most prize."

"It can't be helped. It is inevitable. My country is a poor one, and the men who, in the past, administered it, were rogues."

Charles crossed and placed himself upon a low stool at her side, looking up into her face.

"Oh, you must come to Astia! How happy my life would be if I could always have you near me, always ready to advise me, always present to enhance life with your charm! If you will only come, I will give you a castle in the most delightful spot you ever saw, an old place full of ancient memories, and you shall have a band of faithful servants who will obey your every whim, and the only privilege I shall ask, will be to come and see you now and then!"

"As Henry IV. of France went to visit Gabrielle d'Estrées! Surely, by this time, you must know that I have no liking for the part, and that I would never play it. You offend me if you think I might."

"Forgive me, but the sight of you puts all mad notions in my head. Ah, if I were only free!"

"But you have a wife, an excellent wife, who loves you."

"Yes, but whom I never loved in spite of all her goodness, and whom I only married for a tyrannic reason of the State."

"Hush, you must not say that."

"I say what is the truth. I cannot help it if it sounds crude."

But Isabel rose suddenly to examine a Sèvres vase which stood upon a shelf in the window corner, and while she did so Charles contemplated her, stretching out his arms towards her in an imploring attitude. But she moved from the vase to the window, which looked out on the street.

"What a pretty little garden you have here," she said, and he assented dubiously. Suddenly, hearing a newsboy shouting something, she drew aside the curtain and perceived an urchin bearing a sheet, on which was printed in large type:

"Sudden death of the Queen of Astia."

She started back so quickly that Charles exclaimed:

"What is the matter? Whom have you seen?"

It was the boy who gave the answer as he passed the house.

"Evening pap—er. Death of the Queen of Astia. Pap—er."

Charles sprang to his feet, but stood a moment as if irresolute.

"Can that be true?" he asked at length.

"Poor Julia! Oh, but if it be true they will be

searching for me, so I must get back to the Embassy. But stay, I will first send old Mary for a paper, so that if the news is false I may be with you yet a little longer. Ah, Julia, poor Julia!"

He rang the bell and sank down on a chair, his face convulsed.

Isabel, moved, said softly:

"Dear friend, you have my sympathy!" and he gave her a long glance expressive of his gratitude.

Presently there was a knock at the front door and the noise of a conversation in the hall. At length the servant entered, saying that a lady had come for Lady Strange.

"I expect that's Maud," said Isabel gravely.

At a sign from her master, who seemed surprised, the old woman showed Maud in.

She was carrying a newspaper, which she handed silently to Isabel, who read the telegram, which stated briefly that the Queen had been killed that morning by a fall from her horse, death having been almost instantaneous.

Isabel, in her turn, handed the paper to Charles, who, after reading it, exclaimed again: "Poor Julia! I must get to the Embassy at once. Promise me," he said to Isabel as he was leaving, "that you will come over to me soon."

"I promise that I will try my utmost to persuade myself to go."

With a sigh he kissed her hand and left.

The two ladies waited a few moments, and at length they left and drove home together.

On the journey Maud exclaimed: "If I were only in your shoes, Isabel, I would not hesitate to play the game!"

"What game?"

"The King is widowed, and he loves you to distraction. Those are two facts, dear, the significance of which it's needless to point out!"

But Isabel grew angry. "Do you think I want to be a morganatic wife?"

"There is no knowing *what* you might not be."

"His queen?"

"Why not?"

"Because it is not the daughter of a country doctor who can be galvanised with royalty so as to be eligible, and because I——"

"You can't say you don't like him, Isabel, because I know you do. Who wouldn't—so handsome and so debonair—my beau ideal of a man!"

Isabel was silent. During the remainder of the drive she seldom spoke, and when they reached the house she went up to her bedroom, where she remained a long time thinking over the event of the afternoon.

When she came down to her drawing-room Robert had just arrived.

"You have heard the news," he said.

"Charles has already left. I saw him off an

hour ago at Charing Cross. He has taken a special train and steamer. Poor Charles, he was really troubled."

"Yes. At the bottom he is tender-hearted, a *bon garçon*, a faithful friend."

"He is all that, but it makes me writhe to hear you praise him."

"*Natürlich*, as the Germans say, *natürlich*."

"And now he is a widower! He becomes free just as I am to become chained."

"It's very bad taste of you to speak like that—very bad taste indeed, and I am sure that your cousin, in your place, would have expressed himself quite differently."

"Very likely," said Robert, piqued. "He would have used more phrases to convey the same meaning, but, you see, I am not a phrase-maker."

"You look very ruffled, Duke. Were you, too, shocked the other night at my friend's play?"

Robert said:

"Had it not been weak, it would have been offensive."

"Remember that the author is a friend of mine."

"If he were not, I would express myself much more explicitly concerning him."

"Oh, ho, Duke, you are in an aggressive mood to-day, it seems."

"How can I help it? When I see a woman of your worth encouraging such people as this

Vincent, this Socialist, this kind of an adventurer."

Isabel's eyes flashed. "What do you mean by that?"

"Well, I have made enquiries since last night, and it appears that his paternity is shrouded in a kind of mystery."

"A mystery which you, perhaps, had better not attempt to pierce."

"Why not? I half suspect the truth, but it does not trouble me. Such—side issues—are not unknown in our ranks, and are accepted—and ignored. His resemblance to Duke Ferdinand is striking."

"I admire the way in which you dispose of him. Side issue is distinctly neat. All the same, if anything were calculated to convert me to Mr. Vincent's tenets, it would be a speech like that."

"I'm not afraid of your conversion. You are too patrician to do that. I shall say more, I don't believe that you could ever marry a Mr. Vincent."

Isabel was silent for a moment, frowning. She said at length: "You, at all events, on your own admission, are prepared to wed a physical misfortune."

"Yes, but that is in my country's interest."

Isabel laughed. "Does your country ask you to do that? Is she not quite happy under her republican régime?"

"No, she is daily sorrowing."

"Duke," said Isabel, "you will allow me to be sceptical."

"If you doubt," said Robert, producing a letter from his pocket, "let me ask you to read that."

He handed her the letter and she read:

"Sire, since I last wrote, there is no change in our unhappy country, which has even gone a little farther on the road of decadence. On all hands the people are complaining of increased taxation. Every day the register of crime increases. Mistrust and calumny are rife. Only a speedy restoration can bring us back prosperity and happiness."

There was more in this strain, but Isabel had read enough.

"Who is the writer of this letter?" she enquired.

"The uncle of Count Irlay."

"Whose family have been supporters of your house from its beginning. How could he see through any glasses that were not monarchical?"

He drew nearer to her. "I perceive it's not of any use to give you proofs since you deny them. Let us leave all that alone, but tell me; have you reflected as you said you would? Will you come to taste my caviare? It's a present from one of the Grand Dukes."

"Thanks. I would not eat a morsel of that caviare!"

Robert could not repress a movement of impatience.

"Really! don't you think you carry your views too far?"

"I shall answer that question by asking you another. Do you approve of the acts of the Grand Dukes?"

"Well, no, I think they are excessive."

"You think they are excessive! That is all you have to say! I'm afraid you'd pass a poor examination in amenity!"

"Ah, it's easy to see that you have been indoctrinated."

He gazed at her a moment. Then he said:

"You are the most extraordinary woman I have ever seen. As unfathomable as you are seductive. You are at some pains to be the one, but at none to be the other, and it's wonderful how you succeed. What can I say that I have not said before in vain? I have offered you all that I had to offer, including the Grand Duke's caviare, and here am I a hopeless suitor."

"Have you reached the hopeless stage?"

"No, or I should not be here. If Charles can hope, I also can. I am not the first of my family who has been the victim of an unrequited love. Robert V. was despairingly in love with Catherine of Clete, who kept him in suspense for years. At length she married one of his nobles, and what do you think he did?"

"Something terrific, I've no doubt."

“ He disguised himself as a wandering knight, placed himself in the path of Catherine’s husband, insulted him, fought with him, and killed him.”

“ And what became of Catherine ? ”

“ She ended her life in the castle moat ! ”

“ Ah, times have changed since then.”

“ They have, indeed ! ”

“ Men do not fight for women now, and women do not throw themselves away.”

“ No, there is no intensity of feeling now. Humanity is soft and nerveless.”

“ At any rate it’s not insane.”

“ Not yet, but it’s impossible to tell how long it will retain its sanity as it is constituted now. There are in us primordial sentiments and passions which magnify and glorify. It is they that give it zest and vigour. Without them life is nothing, without them men would drift to incoherence.”

“ Well, now, Duke, I don’t entirely agree with you. I think that all those ancient sentiments are for the most part crazy.”

“ Oh, what a heretic you are ! Men and women are the same to-day as they were two thousand years ago, as they will be twenty centuries from now.”

“ Monkeys ? ”

“ No, heroic beings moved by impulses superior to those of animals as diamonds are to common stones.”

“ Are you sure of that ? ”

"Really, you do say startling things. Surely you don't think us on a level with the brutes!"

"It's said we differ only in degree."

"By foolish scientists, who haven't realised themselves or their position in the universe."

"And do you really think you have more wisdom than the scientists?"

"More intuition."

"What you do not know you guess."

"But I do know, and by instinct."

"It's instinct moves the brutes."

"I hope you don't include me in that category."

"No, I place you in a class quite by yourself."

"Tell me one thing," he said impulsively.

"Have you made up your mind what you mean to do with me?"

"Oh, no. I have no right to dispose of you."

"Do try for once to be a little serious. Have you a fixed intention of rejecting me and marrying another?"

"I have no fixed intention. I seldom have a fixed intention."

"Well, you may laugh at me and trifle with me, but I warn you that to do so may be dangerous."

He looked so serious that she enquired: "Why?"

"Because I have determined that of all the women in the world you are the one essential to my happiness."

“ Oh, dear, that’s awkward.”

He continued without noticing her interruption :

“ And, therefore, if you reject me, I shall be driven to extremities.”

“ You will take a trip, no doubt, to the Land’s End or John O’Groats.”

“ Laugh on, but wait and see.”

“ Is that a threat, for if it is I may as well tell you once again that by threats you will gain nothing—worse, you will lose all.”

As on the previous occasion he begged forgiveness, entreated her to install him in her favour once again, declared that he would keep a strong curb on his tongue in future, and ended in a passionate appeal to her to think of his harrowed feelings.

Then she lectured him. He must shake off all his egoism and take his matrimonial projects seriously, make up his mind to do his duty like a man, or better, like a king, and warned him that if he flinched, he would disappoint the hopes of those who had placed their confidence in him, and would weaken his authority. It was only by sacrifices such as these that his ancestors had retained their privilege. He must “pretend” or not “pretend.”

“ Yes,” he said, “ I must pretend, pretend to love when I cannot love, pretend to be reconciled to the hardness of my lot ! ”

But suddenly, before she could retreat, he had

sprung up from his chair and had thrown himself upon his knees before her, his arms encircling her waist. "Isabel, Isabel," he cried in a somewhat strident voice, "you must be kind to me, you must. I cannot live without you. Be kind to me. Be kind."

She rose with a spring and pushed him from her.

He endeavoured to regain his feet, but slipped and fell before her on the floor.

A little laugh escaped her, and the next moment he stood before her, flushed and angry, biting his lips, but silent. She said at length:

"You lost your balance, Duke. That is a fate which often overtakes imprudent men. Let it be a warning to you for the future."

"Good-bye," he said. "I can no longer stand your gibes."

CHAPTER V.

It was early morning when Isabel and Maud reached Charles' capital and drove through the almost silent streets to the Grand Hotel, where rooms had been reserved for them. Isabel, on entering her bedroom, found upon the table an enormous bouquet of white roses to which was attached a card bearing her name. On enquiring of the servant who had sent the bouquet, she was informed that the sender's name had not been given. It was plain that Charles had been the culprit.

She had come in answer to repeated telegrams entreating her to come, telegrams which were so vehement and so pressing that she had at length consented to take what she herself thought a considerable risk.

Still somewhat tired from the journey, although she had slept through the greater portion of it, she nevertheless threw herself upon her bed to rest awhile before beginning the business of the day. She had made it plain to the infatuated monarch that she was coming merely as a friend, and he had agreed to receive her in that capacity.

But if meetings were easily arranged in England, she knew that the case would be very

different in Astia, and as the King had told her that he would be unable to come to the hotel, she doubted whether she would see him until the evening, when she was invited to dine at the palace with a few friends. Twice a week, since the death of his wife, Charles had written to her and made her the confidante of his hopes and aspirations. The fidelity with which he clung to her, indeed, surprised her, the more so as she knew that there was quite a bevy of fair women at his Court, any one of whom would have given worlds to possess the share of his attention she enjoyed. But after all, she realised that she knew nothing of his life, and he might have amorous secrets which she would never pierce. These kings were curious folk, and it was impossible to deny that they possessed an interest such as few possessed, since no other men were placed in positions of so much privilege.

A few hours later, after she had finished dressing and was sipping her coffee in the company of Maud, a letter reached her through the post. It was from Charles, and it ran as follows:

"Dearest of dear friends. Welcome to this land of mine, and thanks, a thousand times, for coming. I am sitting in my study writing this after the *ennuis* of the day are over, and I am thinking of you on your journey hither and consulting the time tables to ascertain if you have reached the frontier yet. How I should love to be with you, flying along in a swift train towards

some peaceful nook where we could spend a season, but I console myself with the thought that I shall see you soon on my own soil, in my own home. I know that the wretched discipline to which I am a slave will make our meetings less easy to arrange than they were in London, for my every movement is watched and commented and misconstrued. But I am well determined that nothing shall prevent me from contriving to see you often. To-night I have invited a few friends, as I told you in my last, and you may be sure that Stonor is not of the number. During the day I am afraid we cannot meet, for I must distribute some medals in the morning, and in the afternoon I promised to be present at the pigeon shooting for the greatest contest of the year. Of course I would leave the pigeon shooters in the lurch if I thought that I could thereby see you, but I fear that is not possible. I would have ventured to suggest that you should come to see the match, did I not know your great dislike of such affairs. But after all, the evening will soon come, when I will have you at my table looking, as you always look, more queenly than a queen. Good-bye, then, till this evening. Rest well after your long journey, and do not tire yourself by too much sight-seeing. My compliments to Miss Sinclair, whom I am glad to welcome too.—Yours absolutely, CHARLES.”

Isabel handed this letter to her friend, who, after reading it, exclaimed: “Oh, you lucky

woman, to have a king to write to you like that! It's growing quite exciting!"

"Do you think I look excited?" Isabel enquired.

"No. If all the monarchs of the world came here to honour you, I don't believe you would be stirred a bit!"

Isabel exclaimed: "If I were not as I am, I certainly should not be here."

"Ah, well," said Maud, "you manage your affairs in your own strange way!"

"The question is, does any good accrue either to myself or others from the way in which I act?"

"That's a riddle for you alone to solve."

"I mean to solve it soon."

They spent the day in visiting the shops, driving later in the shady avenues of the Listin Park, where Astian society appears in the afternoon, and taking tea in a pavilion in the middle of the woods to the strains of a Hungarian band. Isabel had only a slight acquaintance with the capital, but its brightness and the fineness of the climate pleased her. She noticed the light-hearted air of the people, and wondered how, considering the country's difficulties, such an attitude could be maintained. No doubt beneath such skies embarrassments were lightly borne. Perhaps that was why Charles was so debonair.

When the evening came Isabel devoted so much time to her toilette that Maud declared the

circumstance significant. It was plain that she had come to please, she said, and that was a hopeful sign. She had only to accept the direction of the hand of fate and all was roses on her path.

At seven it was announced that a king's carriage was at the door to take the ladies to the palace, and this, Maud thought, was a compliment of the greatest meaning. "See," she said, "how the servants bowed to us as we went out. The personal friends of the King! I feel proud of it myself."

But Isabel was silent, and they glided along through the heart of the city in the midst of tramways and of motor cars until they reached the palace. This was a white stone building covering an immense area. All the windows on the ground floor were protected by iron bars, and had it not been for the decoration and the window curtains, the place might have been mistaken for a sumptuous jail.

Passing through a high gateway, at which stood a sentry, the carriage entered the courtyard, an immense quadrangle, and stopped before a flight of steps at the opposite end. The two ladies alighted and ascended the staircase, finding themselves presently in a large hall with marble columns and a domed roof. A major domo, wearing a chain of office, advanced, enquired their names, and requested them to follow him. He led them up the central staircase to a door before which stood a janitor in a

gorgeous uniform, to whom he whispered a few words. Immediately the door was thrown open and Isabel and Maud entered a gilded antechamber from the further end of which the King advanced to meet them. He was in evening dress, without an order, and alone.

"Welcome," he exclaimed vehemently. "My gratitude to you for coming is unbounded."

"Ah," he said as he shook hands with both, "I have passed through a trying period and have need of friends like you."

Then he opened a small door near the mantel and called "Roxin," whereupon a young man entered whom he introduced as the Duke of Roxin and who presently began a conversation with Maud. Charles, moving a little apart with Isabel, was able to speak with her without being overheard.

"I contrived this little stratagem," he said, "in order to be able to talk to you before the others come."

Isabel said: "You are so magnificent here that I shall be afraid, perhaps, to say a word."

"No, no, it's not my too pretentious surroundings that can intimidate you. If I thought so I should knock this palace down and build a cottage on its site."

"That, certainly, would please me less."

"I confess I'm glad of that, because this place, though comparatively modern and not a bit historic, is a very comfortable and spacious habita-

tion. It was built by my father, and it cost the nation millions that are not yet paid."

"What beautiful Gobelins," said Isabel, looking at the tapestry upon the walls.

"I purchased them in Paris about five years ago. Do you see that peasant in the wood? He is sighing to the beauty on the haystack who will not come down to him. I often look at that."

"I'm sure," said Isabel with a laugh, "that if he sighed for ever she would never stir."

Charles laughed, but quickly became serious.

"We haven't much time for badinage," he said. "In a few minutes the others will be here. I want to ask you to meet me to-morrow at four o'clock in the forest of St. Joseph at the spot called the Broken Cross. I entreat you to be there, as I have need of your advice."

"I shall be there," she said.

They had no time to say more, for immediately the first guests were announced, and were followed by others in quick succession.

The party consisted of the young Duke who had been already introduced, of a Colonel who was the King's aide-de-camp and who was said to be his confidant, of a young Marquis and his wife, and finally of an untitled couple bearing the name of Peterus. The lady of Semitic type who was thus called, young and extremely handsome, was magnificently draped in black, and was wearing diamonds in her jet-black hair. When she was introduced to Isabel she gave her a penetrat-

ing glance. Isabel observed the expression of her face, which seemed to her to indicate hostility. It was evident to her that she would have to study the demeanour of this lady closely. At table in the stately hall Isabel was on the right of Charles, and the Marchioness, a somewhat sympathetic little woman, Isabel considered, on his left. Madame Peterus and the Colonel sat opposite, while the Duke, the Marquis, Maud, and Peterus occupied the other places.

As the party was small, the conversation was mostly general. After a lull, however, Madame Peterus continued to speak to Isabel, asking her impressions of the city and whether she intended to prolong her stay. The King, hearing this question put, supplied the answer: "Oh, yes, Lady Strange has come amongst us for a long, long time, I hope, and is going to take a furnished house in Listin Park."

Isabel started upon hearing this, and glanced at Charles somewhat reproachfully. She thought it better, however, not to contradict the statement, and the matter dropped.

Presently the conversation turned upon the doings of the Socialists. The Colonel announced that a congress was to be held in the city soon, no means having been found to prevent it, consistent with the right of meeting which had been given to the people in the preceding reign.

"Fortunately," said Charles, "we can control them in some measure. The police know how to act."

"Yes, and as your Majesty is aware, the foreign members may be instantly expelled if they use seditious language."

"Certainly," said Charles, "the expulsion law gives us the right to get rid of foreigners *en deux temps et trois mouvements*, as the French express it."

"Oh," said Isabel laughing, "if you have such a law as that, I'm afraid I shall have to keep my trunks all ready packed."

"You forget," said Charles, "that I have some little influence."

"Even Count Stonor," said Madame Peterus, "is obliged to protect the protégées of his Majesty."

This was not said without some malice, and Charles glanced at the handsome woman in the black silk dress somewhat sarcastically.

"Quite so," he said, "and whether they are foreigners or not."

"Precisely," Madame Peterus said with a little bow.

But Charles, who did not like passages of arms, called upon the Colonel to relate the experiences of his recent visit to the farthest and roughest corner of the kingdom, and the whole table was amused at the vicissitudes which had befallen him as a motorist, owing to the stupidity of peasants and the lack of civilised accommodation at the inns at which he had been forced to stay. One night he was given a room, but the

other guests at the side, above, and below all snored so loudly and the walls were so exceptionally thin, that he was forced to take to the road again in the middle of the night. Then he lost his way and drove into a pond.

The incident was related with humour. The guests laughed heartily. The King sighingly complained that such adventures never came to him, while Madame Peterus expressed her sympathy that he should be deprived of such delights.

Throughout the meal Isabel, occupied in studying her new environment, did not speak much. Maud, however, chatted gaily with the Duke, who spoke English fluently.

At dessert Charles, who had partaken somewhat freely of a vintage wine, was in an expansive mood.

"You know," he said, looking round the table, "the French adage, '*Les amis de nos amis sont nos amis.*' Now I want you all to take that well to heart. It would give me pleasure if all of you in this little party would become good friends. Lady Strange, whom it is my privilege to receive to-night, is the best of friends, the surest of allies. You are fortunate to meet her. It is not my custom to drink toasts, but to-night I must make an exception. I lift my glass to the health of our English visitors. May they stay long amongst us and have many friends."

The toast was duly honoured, and Isabel

replied, as she was bound, that it had been a great pleasure for them to come to Astia, and that her stay would be as long as her engagements in her own country would permit, and as she said this she looked at Charles with a significant expression.

After dinner bridge was played, and Isabel joined in the game in order not to seem unfriendly, although she cordially disliked card playing. The Marchioness was very affable towards her, and seemed desirous of making her acquaintance. Madame Peterus, in spite of Charles' intimation, was reserved. The Colonel and the Marquis were all smiles.

The party broke up at eleven. The King accompanied Isabel and Maud as far as the entrance hall, a rare mark of distinction.

As he pressed her hand, Charles murmured: "At four to-morrow!"

The next day, early in the afternoon, the two ladies set out in a motor for the forest of St. Joseph, which lay some fifteen miles to the westward of the capital.

Maud was in high spirits, but Isabel was serious, taking little heed of the gay and sunlit suburbs or the elegant chateaux which they passed upon the road. Maud said she seemed to be ruminating some terribly complex problem, and Isabel replied that it might be that she was.

When they reached an avenue of plane trees

leading to the Cross, Isabel caused the car to stop, and she alighted, leaving Maud to wait for her.

Passing through the avenue quickly, she reached a spot at the entrance of the woods where stood a large stone cross, one arm of which was broken. Perceiving no one there, she looked at her watch, and, finding she had arrived somewhat before the time, began to stroll around the base of the Cross when suddenly she saw a man approaching from the forest side whom, after a careful scrutiny, she recognised as Charles. For in his rough tweed suit and flannel shirt, with his moustache drooping, and an irregular shaped soft felt hat, the brim of which partly obscured his face, he looked more like a loafer than a king. He lowered his hat and revealed his face as he met her. Then, after taking both her hands in his, he boldly took her arm and led her towards the thickest of the wood.

"At last!" he muttered, "at last I have you here."

"And I daresay you think," she answered, "that there is some significance in my being here. If so, you're wrong. I merely came to meet you as a friend would meet a friend. I'm anxious you should understand that clearly."

"I know you're anxious," he answered with a smile, "but do not be alarmed. In my hands you're quite safe."

"I should hope so," Isabel said quickly.

He led her to a rustic seat beneath a tree.

"If I had not seen you," he said, "I should have done something rash. I have been thinking of you half the night and all the day."

"In that case you were doing something rash."

"Perhaps, but listen. I have just given orders for the Villa Oriol to be prepared for you. No one knows to whom the place belongs, and I am at liberty to let it to whom I please. I insist on your accepting the loan of it for your stay. You will provide your own servants and manage the place as though it were your own. It's much the nicest place you could find in Listin Park, where houses are hard to get, and I could not think of your living in any other part since there is not another half so good."

"If you allow me to pay rent," said Isabel, "I will accept—not otherwise."

Charles started as though hurt. "As you like," he said; "though it isn't very friendly on your part. The rent you pay my steward, who shall wait on you to-day, will be given to the hospital for little children of which you are a patroness. Are you satisfied with that arrangement?"

"Perfectly."

"And now that we have settled where you are to live, we can talk of all my woes. When I saw you in my little house in London, you remember, I was obliged to leave you to come

here for the reason that you know. I wrote you what occurred. I need say no more of that. But now I want to speak to you, my sympathiser and my truest source of inspiration, about the events of the last few days. There is what is called a crisis here. Yesterday the left hand monkeys in the Chamber had a violent discussion with the right about the Civil list. One of the left declared that I was a too expensive luxury, whereupon a right hand man retorted that he was a miserable cur. There was an uproar, and at length a Socialist moved a vote of censure on the Government for having refrained from considering how my pay could be reduced, and by some extraordinary misadventure this vote was passed. Stonor was absent at the time, but when he arrived and learned what had occurred and saw that everyone expected his resignation, he mounted the tribune and delivered a speech which made the left ashamed of having voted as it had. Then he announced the series of retrenchments which he told them he had been preparing for so long. Every service except the army was reduced, and I had my wings clipped still more closely in spite of the sacrifices which I made, as you remember, only a few months since. Stonor came to see me towards midnight, and I told him that he had reduced me to a state of indigence which was abominable. He said that he only wished he had been able to deduct still more. On this we quarrelled, and

to-day there is an outcry in the press against him. Nevertheless, the man is powerful. He had the firm support of the centre and a portion of the right, and I cannot force him to resign as long as he possesses a majority. That is not all. He deals with me as if I were his child, and I have heard that he has some project of marrying me to a princess of his choosing! But that is the last straw! At this I shall rebel!"

He struck the ground with his stick with sudden energy. Then he looked up at Isabel with a long enquiring glance.

"It's plain, dear friend," she said, "that the situation is embarrassing. Stonor impoverishes you, but yet supports you. He's enemy and friend combined. As far as I can see, he is the bulwark against advancing Socialism. I am afraid you can't afford to quarrel with him in the present state of things. As for the Princess, who, of course, is rich, I'm afraid I can say nothing on that score."

"At all events," he said, "I'm glad you don't advise me to submit in that as well."

"I should certainly not like to see you marry a woman whom you might not like."

"I should never do that, never!"

"No, I do not think you would."

"Oh, these politicians," Charles exclaimed with a gesture of despair. "I've come to hate the very name of Parliament. It's only when I'm with the army that I feel myself a man. I've

ordered a review of all the troops here for next Saturday, and you shall see me in my element."

"I shall look forward to that with pleasure, and in the meantime I should be glad if you would have made for me a little *précis* of the country's revenues and its expenses. I'm not extremely well versed in such matters, but yet I think I might be able to suggest some sources of prosperity which Stonor may have overlooked, and which you might easily point out to him. Also, if you cared to do so, you might make a little statement of your own affairs so that I might consider the one in relation to the other."

Charles clapped his hands. "That is just what I have been wanting somebody to do for me whom I could trust, and you with your wisdom are just heaven sent."

And thus it was arranged. He would explain his difficulties and she would endeavour to discern the best way out.

"And now," the King said, "it's evident that you must let me call to give the explanation. To-morrow you will be installed. The next day may I come?"

"Yes, if you are ready with your statements then."

"I shall labour day and night to get them all prepared."

"I like your great enthusiasms. And how is your cousin Robert?"

"Why speak of him when we have so little time to spare?"

"Because he interests me also."

"Well, then, I heard from him last week. He was in Vienna, and, as he expressed it, physically well! Ah, his marriage was a trial for him. The lady was even plainer than his expectations. But he went through with it in true dynastic style. Moreover, the officer whom I sent to represent me told me that when he led his bride away his face was quite a study. However, there were compensations. A wealthy uncle made a very large donation, and I conferred on him the Order of the Golden Twig."

This provoked a sudden burst of merriment from Isabel.

"Really, I can't help wondering whether you royal people don't at times seem rather comic to yourselves."

"To me we often do. To Robert, never."

"No, that is just the difference between you."

"You see, my dear friend, as my calling is to be a king, and I haven't any other, I must do the things that others do in my place. There's no escape from that. You must either play the part or not."

"Of course, and I should be the last to bid you neglect your profession. Only you must allow me now and then to smile. The golden twig! What kind of an object may that be?"

"One that is vastly coveted, I can assure you."

"Ah, well, no doubt it's very nice to wear."

"Ask Robert!"

Isabel laughed, and the subject dropped.

"Who," enquired Isabel, after a slight pause, "is Madame Peterus?"

A smile stole over Charles' face.

"The subtlest of the subtle."

"So I imagined. Is she a particular friend of yours?"

"If by particular you mean intimate, then no."

"Have you many of such women at your Court?"

"Her counterpart does not exist. But you need not be afraid of her. I will not let her trouble you."

"Are you sure she'll wait to ask permission?"

"Her social fate is in my hands."

"I forgot how powerful you are."

Charles said: "Ah, if I had the power for which I sigh!"

"And that is?"

"The power to persuade you to be clement."

Isabel rose, and was beginning to move away when he ran after her, imploring her to stay.

She did so with reluctance.

"How am I to have confidence in the possibility of our friendship if you already speak so plainly?"

He joined his hands in an attitude of prayer.

"Humbly I crave forgiveness. The words escaped me."

“I’m afraid they’re such as you are in the habit of employing frequently. A man in your position, I suppose, makes facile conquests, and is naturally disposed to think that he can always make them.”

“I, at all events, am far from thinking that.”

At that moment a man, dressed as an artisan with a dark beard and a peaked cap, appeared at some little distance in the forest, keeping his eyes fixed on them as he advanced. Suddenly Charles stopped speaking, growing pale and thrusting his right hand into his breast pocket.

Isabel observed his perturbation and, not without some feeling of alarm, watched the man’s approach. The latter, perceiving that he was observed, deviated somewhat to the left and emerged, after a few moments, in the rear of the stone cross. Here he paced several times up and down, casting furtive and perplexed glances at Charles and Isabel. Then, at length, with a sudden impulse, he turned his back on them and left. Charles heaved a sigh, and withdrew his hand from his breast pocket, where it had remained while the artisan was near.

“What is the matter?” Isabel enquired.

“Nothing,” he replied, endeavouring to regain composure. “Only I have just realised that I am wrong to expose you to the dangers which beset us miserable men!”

“What dangers?”

“Did you not see that man? He had a face of the Anarchist type. No doubt he half suspected my identity. But he was not sure, and so reserved his favours for another day!”

“Is it possible,” asked Isabel, “that anyone, even an anarchist, should wish you evil? I can scarcely believe such men exist!”

“To you, living in England, it seems impossible, no doubt, but here it’s different. Outside of England we are targets, all of us.”

“Does that not tell upon your nerves?”

“It might if I allowed myself to have such things.”

“Nevertheless you must be prudent and not expose yourself too needlessly.”

Charles shrugged his shoulders.

“I cannot live surrounded by a body-guard, and for the rest it does not matter very much!”

Isabel was silent, tracing a figure on the ground with her parasol. Presently Charles resumed: “But let us think no more of this. Life is pleasant while we live it, and we must not spoil the pleasure by foreboding. Unfortunately the little time I had to devote to you to day is spent. I must get back to the palace, where I have to do some pinning.”

“Pinning?”

“Yes, some medal pinning on the breasts of veterans. I hope I shall be more successful than last time, when I sadly pricked a hero!”

They rose, and as Charles was taking leave, he said :

" On Friday I propose, with your permission, to bring my little girls to see you."

Isabel declared that she would be delighted to receive the children, and as they parted she pressed his hand more warmly than before.

She watched him a moment as he dived into the woods, and then strolled slowly back to Maud.

" You haven't been very long," the latter said.

" No. My friend had to do some pinning."

" What is that ? "

" Decorating breasts."

" I see," said Maud with a little laugh. " I wish he'd think of decorating mine."

On the drive home Isabel told her companion what had been arranged, of the house in Listin Park they were to inhabit and of Charles' promised visit with his little girls, all of which Maud declared to be extremely satisfactory.

When they returned to their hotel they found a lady waiting for them who was to help them to increase their knowledge of the Astian tongue, which Isabel spoke fairly well, and they spent the remainder of the afternoon with her.

The next day, towards sunset, they removed to the Villa Oriol, which, under the supervision of Charles' steward, had been rapidly prepared for their reception. It was a bright and elegant as well as a commodious residence, entirely shut off from the avenue in which it stood by trees

and shrubs, and it possessed a little terraced garden, prettily laid out with flower beds, and adorned with statues of Pan and a marble fountain. The Empire furniture of the large square rooms was little less than sumptuous, and the decorations and the paintings on the ceilings exquisite. Even Isabel was unable to disguise her admiration for the beautiful abode, while Maud declared it was a paradise.

"The worst of it is," said Isabel, "this furniture suggests the Malmaison and Josephine. It's too Napoleonic." Maud, however, declared that Isabel was never satisfied, and taking her friend's arm led her to the boudoir near the drawing-room.

"Another," she said, smiling as she pointed to a magnificent bouquet of white roses which lay upon the table. "It came while you were speaking to the cook."

Isabel smelt the bouquet. "No doubt he is a thoughtful friend."

"He's something more than that, I fancy," Maud said slyly, but Isabel refused to listen, and went out on the balcony to take the evening air.

The next day the two ladies in their car were on the riverside parade ground, in the eastern quarter of the town, at nine o'clock. The troops were already there, drawn up in two deep columns of all arms. At the farther end of the vast enclosure stood the staff, and through their glasses the ladies could distinguish Charles in a

light blue uniform, mounted on a snow-white horse, and standing somewhat in front of the remainder. He was drilling the troops himself, it was said by someone in the next carriage, and presently, at a word of command proceeding from him, the two brigades began to move and to execute an evolution. For nearly an hour he kept them in activity, issuing his commands in a clear voice, and nodding approvingly from time to time when the performance pleased him. At length, when they had wheeled, formed line, advanced, retired, closed, extended, and deployed, he sounded a halt, and there was a pause, during which he conferred with the brigade commanders. At this moment Isabel perceived Madame Peterus among the spectators in the reserved space in front of the car, and presently, to her annoyance, she saw the lady move towards her.

"Good morning, Lady Strange. I see that you are as interested in military displays as I am myself. It isn't everybody cares to come out so early."

"I'm fond of early rising," Isabel replied; "we're much too late in England."

"Nevertheless, have you not a proverb which says that the early bird catches something?"

"Yes, a worm."

"I hear," continued Madame Peterus, "that you are at the Villa Oriol."

"Yes, I have taken the house for the remainder of my stay."

"A charming residence. I went there to see the lady who inhabited it previously. At least I went there once."

As Isabel said nothing, she pursued:

"How active his Majesty is this morning! Drilling them himself! It's admirable!"

Before Isabel replied a word of command was heard, and the troops came to attention. Then the brigade commanders, having resumed their posts, the King, followed by his staff, was seen to cross the ground. Presently he halted only a few yards to the right of Isabel, whom he saluted. Madame Peterus withdrew.

After a brief pause the united bands began to play, and at a given signal the battalions moved off in succession and marched past the King.

As she saw the colonels brandishing their swords as they passed the soldierlike figure on the white horse, Isabel could not help saying to her friend, "How well he looks! How well they all look, Maud!" to which Maud answered, "Beautiful!"

When it was all over, when the last battalion had defiled, Charles remained a few moments speaking to his staff. Then, turning, he saluted Isabel again, and rode off with his aide-de-camp, cheered somewhat by the crowd.

The next day, in the afternoon, Isabel awaited the King's coming. As there were confidential matters to discuss, it was arranged that Maud should remain in the garden summer-house, and

not appear until the visit was nearly over, and while waiting, Isabel read intently a book entitled *Political History of Astia*, which she had been studying since her arrival.

Punctually at four Charles came.

He entered the room, leading by the hand two little fair-haired girls of six and seven years.

"My little family," he said.

Isabel kissed the children and admired their pretty faces, which bore a slight resemblance to their father's.

"They would like to play," Charles said, "in the garden," whereupon Isabel called Maud, who took them in her charge.

"And now," Charles asked, "I want you just to tell me if you're happy here."

"Completely. May I ask if you have brought the papers?"

With a little sigh Charles plunged his hand into the breast pocket of his frock-coat and produced a packet of papers bound together by an elastic band.

"Here," he said, "is the tedious collection."

Then he gave them to her one by one with a few words of explanation in respect of each.

Isabel scrutinised them closely, asking a question now and then, and making notes in the margin as he answered.

"To what," she asked, "does Stonor devote the most of his attention? The revenue or the expenditure?"

"The expenditure, decidedly. It's a monomania with him."

"Very well," said Isabel, "I shall remember that. If you will leave the papers with me, I shall think it all out quietly."

"Thank heaven," Charles exclaimed, "that bother's over for to-day!"

"And now," said Isabel, "I feel that I must compliment you on your brilliant performance yesterday."

Charles' face lit up. "Did you really think they did it well?"

"Yes, and they were admirably handled."

"Praise from you is as ambrosia!"

"If your nation went to war, no doubt you'd take the lead."

"Yes. But there's no chance of war. The peoples of the earth no longer want to fight."

"Do you regret it?"

"No—fighting is nasty work when all is said and done."

"I'm glad you think so. If you had been one of the bloodthirsty, I should have hated you."

"And now?"

"I hope you don't expect me to reverse the proposition."

"I hope, as always—against hope."

"I cannot even say, hope on."

"And yet I must."

"Well, well, let us leave all that alone. I want to do all I can for you, because I have for

you the greatest of regards. I want to see you happy, which you do not seem to be at present. Before I leave I want to see you quite yourself again—as jovial as you were of old.”

“If you leave, I shall grow wretched.”

“No, you have too many means of keeping yourself gay. By the way, who was the lady that occupied this house before me?” Charles started slightly.

“Who,” he asked, “has been telling you about her? Madame Peterus, no doubt.”

“Exactly.”

“Oh, the mischief-maker! The lady was— Must I really tell you? A lady whom I only—whom I did not esteem as you—”

“That is enough. But don’t you think it wasn’t very nice of you to place me in the same environment?”

“Oh,” ejaculated Charles, “I hope you won’t be vexed at that. I knew no other house that was so bright.”

“And where is the lady now?” asked Isabel.

“Departed—gone to China.”

“Did you banish her?”

“She had a row with Stonor and then left.”

“Ah, well, I have no right to pry into your inner life.”

“At least you evince some interest in me, and even that is better than indifference. I know that in England men are theoretically saints, and

are never willing to admit the contrary. Here, alas, we are given to confess that we are human."

Isabel laughed.

"In that way," she remarked, "you escape the imputation of hypocrisy, although you may at times—well disconcert—your friends."

"Alas, alas, what can I say! To please you, must I try to be—not human?"

She laughed again.

"It's not for me to say what you should try to be."

"And yet I should so much like to follow your advice."

Charles rose, and for a few moments stood before her, gazing at her as she folded the pleats of her muslin dress upon her knees.

"I am so lonely," he burst out at length, "so lonely! In that great palace over there I feel so solitary. I was not meant by nature for the life I am now leading."

"Are you then living in a way to which you've not been hitherto accustomed?"

"Yes."

"Poor monarch! But cheer up. A brighter time is in store for you. There are more princesses in the world than Stonor's."

"It's cruel of you to talk like that after all I've said."

"Perhaps it is, but one must at times be cruel to be kind."

"That is a strange doctrine!"

"In the present case it seems a necessary one."

"To you, but not to me!"

"Some day, perhaps, you will adopt my views."

"No, no, that day will never dawn."

Saying this he moved up to the piano, and seating himself before it, wove these words into a melody of his composition, adding: "I shall never dream of aught but love, of love for one alone."

His voice was soft, and the melody so soothing that Isabel leaned back in her chair and listened dreamily with her eyes half closed.

At the last note, he turned round suddenly, and surprised her in this attitude. Then he jumped up from the music-stool and placed himself beside her on the sofa.

"Do not be alarmed," he said, as she drew somewhat away.

"I assure you, you can trust yourself with me. I am infatuated and submissive, clay to be moulded at your will!"

"It's fortunate," said Isabel with a serious expression, "that I am able to keep cool in spite of all, or I don't know what would happen."

"I cannot think it fortunate—for either of us."

"You see," she said, "I am no Josephine."

"Napoleon married Josephine."

"And divorced her afterwards!"

"Yes, he was a faithless wretch with whom I should not like to be compared."

"No, you are a higher type, I feel convinced."

"Thank you," he said demurely. "I am so grateful for a token of esteem!"

"You don't doubt my esteem for you, I should not think."

"No, no, I know you have some for me in your own strange way. Do you know what I have organised for you?"

"I cannot guess."

"The Court being still in mourning, a ball was quite impossible, so I thought of a quiet garden fête at Clemno, where I have a summer residence. I left the date for you to fix."

"Really," said Isabel with heightened colour, "you confuse me with solicitude."

"I have ordered my string orchestra to hold themselves in readiness to go there. Ah, if you knew the trouble I have got into about that orchestra! Stonor and the rest declared it was a luxury I could not justify, but I maintained it all the same, and mean to keep it. The fact is there is not a pleasure that I take which isn't called a crime by those who count its cost in food or clothing for the poor! Why, if you count that way, I haven't a right to a single *hors d'œuvre* on my table, or the smallest good cigar!"

"Some say," remarked Isabel, "that we have

not a right to more than a portion of the things which we possess."

"That may be true, but it is also true that we have needs which must be satisfied, and luxury is one of them when you have been accustomed to it from the cradle."

"I like that way of putting it. It's far more frank than many I have heard."

"What a troublesome age this is," the King said with a sigh.

"Have you noticed that everything which formerly was considered natural is questioned and discussed?"

Isabel smiled. "Oh, yes, I have noticed that. I'm one of the questioners myself."

"But why?"

"A natural bent, perhaps, or it may be I have caught the spirit of the times."

"Ah, well, I suppose, in that way, one arrives at the truth of things."

"I think it probable one does."

The tea was brought, and Maud and the children called in from the garden.

Isabel took the elder of the two princesses on her lap, and spoke to her about her tastes and occupations, but the little girl was reticent, glancing alternately at her father and at Isabel reflectively.

"Come, little one," Charles said, "just tell us what you have been doing in the garden."

The child held up a little bouquet of carnations silently.

"You have been plucking those," the father said, "for whom?"

She looked around the room a moment, as if undecided. Then she broke away from Isabel, crossed over to her father, and offered him the little bunch.

Charles took it, rose, and gave it to Isabel, saying: "Next time, I hope, Eva will pick a larger bunch for you."

Eva seemed embarrassed, but Charles continued: "I want you to be a friend of Lady Strange, who is not at all like Madame Peterus," and he explained that his little daughter had an instinctive dread of Madame Peterus. Isabel spoke kindly to the child and to her sister, and it was not long before she had gained their confidence. Charles, in the meantime, chatted with Maud, who amused him by her deference.

A little later, as Charles was leaving, Isabel inquired of him if Madame Peterus would be at the garden fête.

"Alas," said Charles, "how can I omit her? Her husband is a financier of whom I stand in need."

"I see!" said Isabel.

"But do not be alarmed," Charles added. "I have already promised to protect you from her shafts."

Then he settled the day of the evening function, and departed with the children.

"Isn't he divine!" said Maud, as soon as the door was closed.

But Isabel shook her head.

"Oh, no, he's very human."

But Maud replied: "He's both!"

For a few days Isabel spent the greater portion of her time both at home and in the National Library studying the finances of the country. She found the task not without some difficulty, although her mind had been well developed by her father, and although she was afforded information by the librarian, who had himself been a functionary in the Ministry of Finance. It soon occurred to her that if the expenditure could not be well reduced, the revenue might not impossibly be increased. Therefore she selected a few items, and investigated them as far as she was able, although she found herself at a loss at times to fully comprehend the intricacies of the national accounts. There could be no doubt, she thought, that the State lands were only made to yield a portion of their due, and that the acres of the Crown were insufficiently developed. The minerals on both were to a large extent neglected or yielded only trifling royalties.

There was, she became convinced, a source of income there that either had been overlooked or intentionally neglected. She wrote to Charles for additional information, and he despatched his private lawyer to her, who supplied all details readily. Then she telegraphed to England for an engineer, with whom she had a lengthy consultation, and whom she sent to view some

of the unused lands in the eastern portion of the Empire.

On the night of the garden fête the two ladies drove to Clemno after dinner—a distance of some twenty miles—and by the time they reached the gilded gates of the domain, it was already almost dark. Passing through an avenue of stately elms, from each of which hung a Chinese lantern, they reached the house, a fine old building in a style which recalled that in vogue in France in the seventeenth century, and especially that of Trianon.

The façade was illuminated by a large arc light, and on the lawn in front of it stood a pavilion festooned with coloured lanterns. On the right and left the tall dark trees of the plantations reared their heads against the starlit sky. A string of lights marked the boundary between the lawn and woods. All about the grounds the few guests were strolling in pairs or groups. A string band was ascending the pavilion.

The motor stopped before the heavily-columned portico, and immediately Charles, who was standing in the hall, advanced to welcome the two ladies.

“This is a very little fête,” he said, as he shook hands, “and only a few intimates are here.”

Isabel, remembering what he had told her as to the mourning of the Court, replied that she quite well understood.

Then he led them round the grounds, showing them the lake and the island where the supper would be served, and back again to the lawn, where Isabel paused a moment to admire a magnificent magnolia which the King said had been planted by his mother.

They had reached the zone of the arc light, when suddenly Charles said: "Do you see that couple coming over there?"

Instantly Isabel recognised Robert accompanied by a lady who was leaning on his arm.

"I forgot to tell you," Charles said with a smile, "they arrived this morning unexpectedly."

As they drew nearer Isabel observed the lady.

She saw a short, high-shouldered, narrow-chested, round-backed woman of thirty, with a large plain face on which the white light falling revealed a wide, ill-shapen mouth and a long thick nose.

Charles held out his hands to them in his usual effusive way. Robert, the solemnity of whose demeanour struck Isabel, introduced the Duchess ceremoniously, and after a few moments' conversation the three ladies walked upon the lawn together followed by Charles and Robert.

The Duchess, Isabel soon perceived, was the ancient type of buckramed royalty, bred and trained to the maintenance of stolid dignity, and with a mind which did not soar above the limits of the commonplace. And Robert, who was not

ill-favoured or altogether without wit, had tied himself for life to that!

Presently there were fresh arrivals, and Charles had to go to welcome them. Isabel and Maud parted with Robert and his bride.

"Oh," laughed Maud, "if she were put in the middle of a field she'd frighten all the crows! Poor Duke, poor Duke!"

"So you see," said Isabel, "it isn't all enjoyment in the class which you admire."

"No, there are ordeals to be faced, no doubt; but then there are compensations."

"Don't be sure that they are adequate."

They were soon discovered by Roxin and the General, in the company of whom they presently took seats to listen to the orchestra, which had begun to play a soft gavotte.

"You see," explained the General, "this is quite a small affair on account of the somewhat recent bereavement of his Majesty. Merely a few intimate friends to cheer him up."

"Is his Majesty depressed?" asked Isabel.

"Well, not exactly, but he tends to be a little dull."

"Yes," confirmed the Marquis, "I noticed that, by the way in which he shot the other day at the pigeon club."

"Do drooping spirits," Isabel enquired, "cause one to aim high or low?"

"I scarcely know," the Marquis answered with a smile, "they certainly make one miss the mark."

On the path in front of the house they could see their host surrounded by a little ring of ladies who appeared to keep him prisoner.

"Do you see that lady with the large hat?" Roxin asked.

"That's the beautiful Countess of Cintris, for whom two men have already died in duels."

"There appear to be some handsome women in that group," said Isabel.

"Yes, for those who admire our native type."

"Are you not one of them?"

"Not altogether."

"Which, then, do you prefer?"

He glanced at her. "The Anglo-Saxon!"

Before she could reply Madame Peterus and her husband were before them.

"You are looking at the ring around the King," the former said with her usual assurance.

"It looks quite astronomical. Lady Strange must think it quite extraordinary."

"On the contrary," said Isabel, "the gravitation seems to me quite natural."

"That is a compliment for his Majesty."

"It may quite well be so construed."

Madame Peterus moved off with an enigmatic smile.

"I think," said the Marquis laughing, "that Madame Peterus has met her match."

"She has," said Maud.

They remained speaking to the Marquis and the General for nearly half an hour, and it

became evident to Isabel that the Marquis was desirous of pressing some kind of suit, but was timid, not knowing what might be the intention of his master. As she was about to rise she perceived Charles hastening towards her.

“ If you will come down to the lake,” he said, “ we will take a boat. Duke, will you give your arm to Miss Sinclair? ”

They descended the path at the side of the lawn, passed through a plantation, and emerged on the shore of a little lake with an island in the centre gaily illumined with Chinese lanterns.

A gondola-shaped boat awaited them, and the party was made up to nine when the King had invited two couples who were near the landing-stage and the General.

Presently they were gliding along upon the water, listening to the strains of the orchestra on the lawn, and enjoying the cool night air. At length, when they had made the circuit of the island twice, the King gave the order to land. In the centre of a circle of tall poplar trees the supper-table had been laid, and a signal having been given, the other guests crossed and gathered round it. Charles took a seat in the centre with Isabel on his right, and the meal, which was an unpretentious one, was served forthwith. When it was over the guests strolled about the island or crossed over to the lawns. Isabel and Maud took the latter course, not waiting for the King, who was again surrounded by his circle of fair women.

Entering an harbour on the shore, they stayed awhile watching the boats returning with their freight of guests.

Maud voted the whole thing dull. She had been placed at supper next to a Hungarian painter who had bored her greatly, and she was not disposed to look upon the function favourably. She had hoped to be placed next the Marquis, but Charles had neglected to do that, and so she was dissatisfied. Isabel, on the contrary, was pleased. She had received as much attention at Charles' hands as she could reasonably expect. Many times during the meal she had surprised the envious glances of the women fixed upon her.

"Did you see the Duke?" Maud asked.

"No, I could not for the flowers on the table."

"He was looking melancholy, poor man."

"Nature cannot very well be outraged with impunity."

"But why did you not dissuade him from that marriage?"

"I? On the contrary, I encouraged him to make it."

"Oh, Isabel! how could you?"

"Dynastic discipline," dear Maud, "is one of the obligations of his caste. To shirk it would have caused him quite as much—discomfort."

"You think things out a long, long way. I wish I had your power."

"Don't. It limits action, and one ought to act as much as possible."

At that moment they heard steps on the path.

Presently they perceived two male forms advancing in their direction. As they drew near Maud exclaimed:

“ His Majesty ! ”

“ Aha,” said Charles, “ so I’ve found you in your retreat.”

“ Did I not say, Duke, they were here ? ”

Roxin assented, and the King declared that they had better return with him, as the place would be deserted as soon as the last boat-load landed.

They rose and took the direction of the house through the plantation, Maud and Roxin leading the way as the King desired.

“ Now,” said Charles, “ we can talk without being overheard ! I’m glad that fête is over. The whole time I wanted to be alone with you, and as soon as I could get rid of those people I searched for you. But you had left without a thought of me ! ”

“ I plead,” said Isabel, “ the necessity for great discretion. Also I saw you in the midst of so much beauty that it seemed to me you must be happy there.”

“ I’m never happy in your absence. I have already told you that I would like to have you always at my side.”

“ As usual, dear friend, you flatter, but embarrass me.”

They had reached the darkest portion of the wood. Maud and the Marquis were well ahead.

Charles took his companion's arm, which, however, remained stiff.

"Have you nothing to say to me?" he enquired plaintively.

"Yes," she answered enthusiastically, "I have to tell you that I've gone right through the national accounts, and that I'm confident I've found some sources——"

But he stopped her suddenly.

"Not about that," he exclaimed disappointedly. "I had hoped that you might have begun to be a little serious."

"Surely I am serious."

"Not in love, and that is the only thing that counts."

"Did I ever profess to be serious in that?"

"No, but those who treat love lightly suffer. Whoever planned this world ordained it so."

Isabel was silent, for she felt that he was right.

Nevertheless she said at length: "But you, King Charles of Astia, surrounded by your galaxy of beauty, the beau ideal of your female subjects, can you *aver* that you are always serious?"

"Ah, you have heard sad rumours, I'm afraid, concerning me! But all that's over now. I am for ever your devoted slave."

"That is more than any man should be, and slavery has long since been abolished. If you simply said 'I shall always have for you the feelings that I should,' it would be quite sufficient."

"But I *have* for you the feelings that I should."

"I find it difficult to think so."

"It must be that we do not both interpret duty in the same way."

"I have been thinking of a plan," said Charles with a tremor in his voice. "An island in the Pacific of vast extent has been offered to me by its proprietor. If I realised all I have, I could acquire it. Having done this I should abdicate. Then if you were willing we would go out to our island and rule it till the end of our days."

"Chimeras! No, you must not abdicate. I would never sanction that. You are too good to rule a host of savages. Besides, you are an institution in the world."

Suddenly, as she said this, she stumbled over a root in the obscurity. To save her from falling he increased the pressure of his arm, and maintained the pressure after she had regained her equilibrium.

"Tell me," he said earnestly, as they slacked their pace, "would you wed me if I were no king?"

The reply was a long time coming, but at length she murmured "Yes!"

He caught her in his arms and kissed her on her forehead. She disengaged herself with sudden energy.

"I have had a moment of weakness. That is over now. Take me back to the house at once and remember our pact."

"By your dear response," he said, "you have given me new hope. Since you will not let me abdicate, I will visit the Courts and confide to my good friends the aspirations of my heart, asking them if they would give me their support in making you my Queen."

"No, no, that would only serve to lower you in their esteem. Not one of them would dare encourage you or promise aid. They know, as you would, if your mind were clearer, that the secret of your caste's prestige is its exclusiveness. Admit the common clay and all is lost."

"The common clay! Is it possible that you should speak of yourself as such!"

"You know that what I say is true."

"No, I can't help feeling that with good will the difficulty might be overcome."

"I have your truest interest at heart. I know what I am saying, and I know how I shall work for you. You can change nothing of your destiny. Let me earnestly advise you to accept it."

They had reached the lawn where Maud and Roxin were awaiting them. Charles looked oppressed, and on the walk back to the house only exchanged a few words with his guests. When they reached the entrance Madame Peterus was there.

She appeared to be struck with Charles' demeanour.

"Is your Majesty not well?" she asked.

Charles answered: "It's a warm night."

"*Lady Strange* looks cool," she ventured.

"Fortunately," said Isabel, "I'm generally so."

"Most English people are," was the retort.

"Yes," Charles interposed, "that is their privilege."

Seeing that Charles defended Isabel, Madame Peterus relinquished the attack. Then the fête broke up. The guests gathered round Charles, taking leave, and Isabel and Maud withdrew.

"You were some time in that wood," said Maud as they were driving home.

"Too long," was the reply.

"Is it permissible to ask how that could be?"

"Because I did not keep as cool as Madame Peterus supposed."

"I'm glad to hear it, for your sake!"

CHAPTER VI.

THE next morning as Isabel was about to leave the villa to shop in the Central Avenue, she was informed that the Duke of Varlemon had called. She decided to receive him, and in another moment Robert stood before her in the drawing-room.

Advancing with a studied dignity, he said :

“ Last night you were perhaps surprised to see me, but not more surprised than I was to see you.”

“ I wasn’t much astonished, Duke, and I scarcely see why you should be. I came over here to try to cheer and help our friend, and I hope that you have done the same.”

Without answering this question, Robert said, as he took the seat she offered him :

“ During the short time I have been here I have heard much concerning you. Rumour in Astia is swift.”

“ Indeed? Please tell me what you really mean.”

“ I mean that if you value your reputation you will not remain another day.”

“ That is no explanation.”

He saw that she was growing angry, and he somewhat modified his tone.

"You surely know the danger any woman runs at the Court of Charles the Gallant."

"I neither know nor wish to know."

"Such indifference to the opinion of the world I was unprepared for on your part."

"Do you suppose you have a right to speak to me like that?"

"None but that which my unconquered passion gives."

"Remember you are married, Duke."

"You take a cruel pleasure in reminding me of that."

"I wish to show you that your attitude is inadmissible."

"I come here in your interest. Already it is whispered that you are Charles'—favourite."

She frowned. "Do you believe it?"

"No, but I see danger in the future."

"It's very kind of you to look ahead for me, but I assure you that I'm capable of caring for myself. From what you said just now as to your right to speak as you have spoken, it seems to me that if there were really danger it would be as great from one cousin as the other."

Robert moved uncomfortably in his chair.

Isabel involuntarily started, and the Duke pursued:

"You alluded to my being married. Are you aware that Charles will shortly share my fate? Yes, it is his duty to give a son to Astia,

and soon. Stonor will see to that—an excellent man, Stonor.”

Isabel laughed outright. “Really, Duke, you must let me compliment you on the way in which you state things. It is his duty—Ha, ha, ha! An excellent man, Stonor! Ha, ha, ha!”

“I’m sorry to have said anything that sounds ludicrous to you. It’s true for all that.”

“And you, Duke, what is *your* duty?”

“Really, you embarrass me. For all of us the duty is the same.”

“It does not, I presume, include fidelity to the lady who assists you to perform it.”

“Why this sarcasm at my expense? I came, as I said before, in your interest, and I don’t deserve your irony.”

“I think you came here also in your own, in which case you would be—inconsistent. A widower is, perhaps, less compromising for a woman than a married man.”

“Not if he be a king!”

“A king, then, I suppose, can compromise but not be compromised.”

“Precisely.”

“A convenient doctrine, certainly, but how long do you think it will obtain?”

“As long as the world lasts.”

Isabel bowed gravely.

“And now,” she said, “I should like a little more explanation concerning the rumours you

spoke of when you entered. From whom have you heard these fairy tales?"

"I regret I cannot tell you. They are current."

"Have you met Madame Peterus?"

"Oh, yes, she was dining with us yesterday."

"Has she put them in circulation?"

"They are current."

"Well, I shall just say this, Duke: that I mean to pursue the end for which I came in spite of all. I presume that those who are my friends will contradict these rumours."

"I have already done so, and if any *man* should dare repeat them in my presence he will have to answer for his temerity to me. But with the ladies it is different. It is there the danger lies."

"I am prepared to face it."

"Ah," he said reflectively, "there must be some incentive to induce you to do that."

Isabel replied: "I have said all I had to say."

"As you will. But I know this country better, perhaps, than you, and I warn you to be careful."

They spoke of generalities, and as he rose to leave, he said:

"I trust that you are not displeased with me."

"No, for I am indulgent. Only don't adopt again the tone you used at first, lest we should quarrel, and I do not like to quarrel."

"Forgive me. I know I spoke out brutally. But where you are concerned, my feelings get the better of me."

"You must control them in the future as you have done in the past, as we all must do, I fear, in this vale of contradictions."

He paused a moment as he was leaving.

"About your friend, the playwright. Is it true that he is shortly to come here to speak at the Socialistic congress?"

"I believe so."

"And have you not dissuaded him from coming?"

"My dear Duke, you little know the temper of the sect if you suppose that any one of them could be turned away by me from a project of that kind. It seems I have more influence with Kings than I have with Socialists."

"Then he must take the consequences, whatever they may be."

"He's capable of doing that, I can assure you."

"We shall shortly see. Good-bye."

When he had left, Isabel remained for some time in her chair thinking over the interview with Robert, and at length when Maud came in, she said:

"It seems that rumour's busy with me, Maud. I'm said already to be the mistress of the King."

"Really!" Maud said alarmed.

"It's zealously proclaimed by Madame Peterus. Shall we pack our trunks?"

"Oh, Isabel! not quite so soon!"

"Ah, well," said Isabel smiling, "you need not be alarmed, I mean to face it."

"I think, dear Isabel, that you will do it for *his* sake."

But Isabel did not reply, and they left the house to shop, as they had originally intended, discussing plans of action on the way.

Nevertheless it became evident that Robert's information was correct, for Isabel soon perceived that few of the ladies whom they met called on them, and that those who did appeared constrained and cold. Her first act was to write to London for an introduction to the wife of the Ambassador, a clever, sympathetic woman who knew one of her relatives, and who took her under her protection. Then she applied herself with redoubled vigour to the task she had undertaken, and began, with the aid of the engineer, who had financial knowledge, to draft a scheme of reforms which promised to place more means at the disposal of the King and State.

One afternoon when this was just completed, while Isabel was taking leave of the Ambassador's wife, who had taken tea with her, the King, without any warning, suddenly appeared.

As soon as they were alone, Maud having gone out to a tennis party, Charles said: "I could not resist the great temptation of coming to take a cup of tea made by the hands of one whom I esteem above all other makers of the sacred beverage. Therefore I am here, expectant and submissive. One lump, please."

Glad to see him, Isabel handed him the cup.

"The lady who has just left," she said, "is my protectress, for I'm sorry to say I need one in your Majesty's dominions. Were it not for her my reputation would be now in bits."

Charles asked with an angry gesture:

"Who dares attack you here?"

"Perhaps the lady whose husband is financially of use."

Charles frowned. "The miscreant!"

"So you see, dear friend, the great necessity there is for putting your affairs and the State's affairs in order."

Then she produced her scheme, reading it over to him, and stopping now and then to explain a passage, or to elucidate a point, emphasising the advantages which would accrue from its adoption. When she had finished, Charles exclaimed:

"And you have evolved it all out of that classic head?"

"Oh, I had advice for some of it, and the rest I cudgelled out of my poor brains."

"Wonderful!" the King exclaimed. "It's wonderful! I never thought that so much wealth lay dormant at my door."

"Perhaps if you had suspected it, it wouldn't be there now."

"You know my weakness! You know me better than I know myself. I love to be understood by you, even if it be to my discredit. I

love to place my worldly interests in your hands, to make of you my confidante. You are a woman whom it is impossible to see and not to trust."

"I would rather you did not praise me quite so much, but attend to business. I want you to study this scheme carefully, so that you may be able to explain it to the Ministers. By working your Iserian estate in the manner shown, you cannot fail to add a large sum to your income, and if you could induce the Government to work the lead mines in Solestia, I have it on the authority of the engineering genius I sent to see them that the gain would be exceptionally great. Add to this the increase from stricter methods in the collection of wine and sugar taxes, and in a year the State will issue from its present plight."

Charles rose and went up to the piano. He struck a few triumphal chords.

"Superb! I shall clamour for these changes till they're deaf. Bravo, bravissimo! Long live my Lady Isabel, philosopher and friend!"

"It's presumptuous of me, I know, to come and advocate these changes, but sometimes a mere onlooker, without any special training, may detect defects which habitual workers cannot see, and, of course, there is a possibility I may be wrong."

"No, no, you are not wrong. You're never wrong. You're astonishingly clever. The worst of it is, you are so talented that it makes me

feel quite shy. I, who am so ordinary a mortal."

"No, that's not a fact: no one could say that who had seen you drill your troops. Also, I've read some of your speeches, and they're good."

"Do you think that I could earn my living if, as the French express it—if I were ungummed?"

"Undoubtedly."

"In what capacity?"

Isabel reflected, puzzled.

"As a composer," she said at length.

"I wrote a song some time ago under a pseudonym and had it published. The results were nil. No, no, I am no genius. If I were upon my own resources I should very soon discover, I'm afraid, what a good-for-nothing I had always been."

"But," said Isabel, "you shall not be thrust upon your own resources, and it is my hope that you may one day prove extremely useful in your present post, if I may so describe it."

"Hitherto, you think, I haven't been worth much!"

"That is far more than I suggested."

"It's what your words implied, and that is true. I've done little for my country, though, upon the whole, my country's done a lot for me."

"Cheer up; the time is coming for you to do much."

"At your bidding I shall act."

"Yes, but I want you also to act on your own initiative."

"Ah, there you touch upon my weakest point. Put me with an army corps and I have some of that quality, but place me with those politicians and I've none."

"We shall see to that, and in the meantime I hope you will begin by trying vigorously to get these few reforms effected."

"Trust to me and they shall be accomplished, even if it's interfering with the Constitution. Ah, the Constitution! The Con-sti-tu-ti-on!"

"It's a curb that you can never hope to slip."

"Talking about curbs," he said, "my sister Ellen returns to-morrow from her stay in Switzerland to resume her place as the head of the establishment. If Robert has an aunt, I, dear friend, possess a sister!"

"Is your sister formidable?"

"She ruled my wife, and she has often wanted to rule me."

"Evidently the ruling spirit's in the family."

"Oh, yes, it's in the blood. Ruling is the only task for which we're fit."

"Are you sure you're fit?"

"Well, I used to think so, but since I have enjoyed your friendship and have talked with you of things, I have begun to have my doubts."

"It's a difficult and daring enterprise to rule a people, and very few of those who undertake it seem to me successful."

"They would be if they had a woman like you at their side."

"I only hope that you won't be disappointed in your estimate of me."

"No, no, I tell myself that in the end you will fulfil my hopes."

"Oh, that depends on what they are."

"Ah, well, I shall not state them now."

They chatted for a while, and as Charles was leaving he enquired :

"May I ask what Madame Peterus has said?"

"I only suspect that she has said I am to you what I am not."

"Oh, yes, the rumour came from her. I recognise her there. But how did you learn this? Was it Robert told you?"

"Of the rumours? Yes."

"Wonderful! He has only been here a few days and he has heard these things. I shouldn't be surprised if he called to tell you."

"Well, I think he did."

"That's Robert, absolutely! Did he come alone?"

"I'm afraid he did."

"Remember that if anyone is compromising now, it's he."

"That's what I told him when he came."

"Why did he not bring his wife?"

"On account of the rumours, probably."

"I shall see to that at once."

"Pray don't."

"But why?"

"Because it might injure you financially, and

until the reforms are carried out I think you will admit that that must not be risked."

"And do you suppose that I should let you suffer for my sake?"

"I shall not suffer. I shall know, I hope, how to meet the situation."

"Adieu, dear friend, and woe to anyone who dares defame you."

For the next fortnight, although he wrote to her almost daily, Isabel saw little of the King, who, having taken up his task in earnest, was busily engaged in its execution, seeing Ministers and politicians, and exhibiting an interest in State affairs he had never evinced before.

Robert prolonged his stay. His wife became intimate with the Princess Ellen and with Madame Peterus. It was whispered in the Court circles that there was a matrimonial scheme on foot for Charles, in which his sister and the Duchess of Varlemon were very much concerned. Charles, indeed, alluded to it in a letter to Isabel as the coercion scheme which he would know the way to baulk. He was determined, he repeated, to pursue his plans without their intervention, and he was the better able to do this as Stonor was absent on a holiday in Italy. It was astonishing how wise, Charles wrote, he was becoming in politics and in finance, and he was sure she would be satisfied with his performances. But always he complained of the extreme difficulty of

arranging interviews with her without giving colour to the rumours which had been spread abroad. His every act, he said, was watched. He was forced to be circumspect, and he hated circumspection.

One day, however, Isabel received an anonymous letter which accused her of being an adventuress, and advised her to leave Astia before she was exposed. She tore this up and did not speak of it to Maud, telling herself that this was the penalty one had to pay for meddling with kings. When, however, she read a veiled allusion to herself in a daily paper which conveyed the same accusation, her equanimity was tried, and when she enquired who the owner of the paper was, she was informed that it belonged to a syndicate, of which the guiding spirit was the French Jew, Peterus. She did not show the article to Charles, who would probably have made as much stir in the matter as he could, but she made a firm resolve that if and when she gained some influence the power of the Peteruses would be curbed.

Everything was going well, Charles wrote. He had consulted economists and financiers, and they had told him that without a doubt a great economy could be effected in the collection of the taxes, which might have been made before, had there not been certain interests at stake. They had declined to say what those interests were, but he would soon find out. Stonor was returning,

and he would discuss these things with him. In the meantime he was a little exercised in mind as to how the approaching congress of the Socialists would pass. Liberty of meeting had been accorded to the people by Radicals ten years before, and now the people would have to stand the consequence. Ah, liberty! Was there ever a greater fallacy than that!

Isabel, however, did not approve this dictum, and she sermonised accordingly.

A few days after she had received this letter she was invited to dine at the palace *sans cérémonie*, as the King expressed it. She accepted, but not without some hesitation, as she did not know what kind of reception was in store for her at the hands of the Princess. She found when she arrived that the party consisted of the King and his sister, Robert and his wife, the Marquis and the Countess Cintris, the Court Doctor, Vinerol, and Stonor.

Immediately on her entrance Charles advanced and conducted her to his sister, a dark and rather stout princess of forty, who acknowledged her bow with a measured courtesy, enquired how long she had been in Astia, whether her stay had been agreeable, and then turned to the Countess, with whom she had previously been speaking. Charles led Isabel to a seat, and she found herself next to Stonor, who fixed his steel grey eyes upon her, saying:

"I had heard of your presence in our midst,

and therefore my surprise at seeing you to-night is not as great as it might otherwise have been."

"Surprise?" she repeated dubiously.

"Well, yes—surprise. We are often honoured by the flying visits of your countrywomen, but you are the first I ever met who came to stay."

"Perhaps I am the first whom the climate altogether suits."

"The climate and the natural conditions."

"Yes, and the natural conditions."

But Robert, who had overheard the veiled attack of Stonor, said:

"Lady Strange is studying your institutions, Count, as I am myself."

"Yes," said Charles, who had approached, "for our good."

On hearing this last remark Stonor looked up suddenly from his contemplation of the carpet. His lips moved as though he would have spoken, but no sound came from them.

"Lady Strange," continued Charles, "has taken an interest in us, as I repeat, for our good, and I am indebted to her for many excellent suggestions in the conduct of our philanthropic institutions, of one of which she is a patroness. They manage these things well in England, better than we do, I am sorry to perceive. From England we can certainly learn much."

"As I live there myself," said Robert, "I can testify to that."

"The wealth of England," Stonor said, "per-

mits her to dispense much charity, and yet when I was last in London I was shown such scenes of destitution as we could not exhibit if we tried."

"The wealth with us," said Isabel, "is concentrated and the population large."

"Ours," said Stonor, "is more equally diffused and our population moderate."

"In that respect," said Isabel, "it is probable that we could learn from you."

A faint smile of satisfaction stole over the face of the Prime Minister at this acknowledgment.

"At the same time," said Charles, "what you, Count, style so picturesquely the moderation of our population is a sorry quality from a military point of view."

"Hum!" ejaculated Stonor, faced by a stubborn fact. But the Countess Cintris succeeded in engaging the attention of the King by asking him a question as to the manœuvres, and he moved to her side and spoke with her while his sister spoke with the Marquis.

Isabel saw that Charles, although he endeavoured not to show it, was attracted by this singularly handsome woman, on whom few men could gaze unmoved. However, she chatted with Robert, who was more than ever assiduous, and continued to do so until the dinner was announced. At table she was next to Stonor, who had completely changed his previous attitude towards her, and had now adopted one of strict formality. The meal, indeed, was characterised

by a certain stiffness which seemed due to the austerity of the Princess, who had a disconcerting way of looking at her guests as though she were engaged in weighing them in her esteem. Charles did not miss an opportunity of leading the conversation on to subjects in which he knew that Isabel was versed, a device which raised a smile on the lips of the Countess Cintris. For the rest, the conversation was upon the ordinary topics of the day, and seldom rose above the commonplace. Whatever the King said was received with a deferential air, and when the Princess spoke all listened. Isabel observed that Charles was careful never to contradict his sister even when his views were opposed to hers. She perceived, also, that he gently sighed from time to time whenever she was more than usually dogmatic.

When the dinner was over and the ladies had been conducted to the drawing-room at the end of the great hall, the Princess, inviting Isabel to sit near her on the sofa, the place of honour according to Astian etiquette, began to ask her questions.

"I am told," she said, "that you are a friend of your Ambassadors. Have you known her long?"

"No, Highness."

"You live habitually in London, I believe, and are a widow?"

"Yes, Highness."

"Habitually do you go to Court?"

"No, Highness."

The Princess frowned. "I believe you are a friend of Duke Robert? Do you know his aunt, the Princess?"

"Recently I have had the privilege of making her acquaintance."

This seemed to slightly reassure the lady, and she said:

"It was at Redmont, I suppose, you met his Majesty?"

"It was."

"And so you thought you would come to see our country?"

Isabel gravely bowed. "It has interested me to study its institutions."

"Indeed. You have not found them on the English model, I am sure."

"No Highness, very different."

"You must know that such as they are, we're rather proud of them."

"No doubt."

"And we don't like change."

"From what I have observed, I should think this country was excessively conservative."

"Excessively."

Apparently satisfied with this confirmation of a fact, the Princess joined in the conversation of the ladies, and Isabel, apparently, no longer occupied her thoughts.

When the gentlemen came in the approach-

ing congress of the Socialists was discussed but briefly, because it was a very firm tradition of the Astian House that all subversive movements were to be spoken of as passing agitations of no serious import, and Isabel noticed that Charles himself, when in this atmosphere, was much inclined to adopt these views.

The guests retired shortly after ten, for it was known that the Princess detested nothing more than staying up late at night. Charles accompanied Isabel to the hall, as previously, and as she was taking leave of him, he whispered :

"It's going splendidly, but Stonor's troubled. No matter, I feel that I'm on the right road now. Good-bye. *Je vous porte sur mon cœur.*"

When Isabel reached the villa, Maud was waiting for her.

"Maud," she exclaimed, "be thankful you were not invited, for she would have riddled you with questions, and a duller evening you would not have spent in all your life. Had it not been for the host I verily believe I should have fled."

"But," said Maud, "he reconciled you to it. We can bear anything for those we love!"

Isabel seized her friend and placed her hand before her mouth.

"Oh, you darling Isabel," said Maud, as soon as she was released, "how much I envy you!"

But Isabel grew angry and declared she would quarrel with her friend if she said another word upon that score.

“Forgive me, dear, I’ll say no more, but tell me how you liked the sister of his Majesty?”

“A perfect horror of a woman who guards her dignity as a miser does his gold. I can’t conceive that Charles should have a sister of that kind.”

CHAPTER VII.

A FEW days afterwards as Isabel was reading in her drawing-room Count Stonor was announced.

Entering with a frown upon his forehead, the Minister bowed stiffly.

"I have come to speak to you upon a matter of extreme importance, and I crave your serious attention."

He paused a moment to adjust his glasses, then resumed:

"For the last few days I have become aware that there is an influence at work in Astia, an influence which is outside Parliament, yet nearer to the throne. It has come to my ears that during my absence, on account of it no doubt, it has been attempted to effect what are falsely styled reforms in the fiscal administration of the country, as well as to tamper with the rights of property in respect of certain mines. Now this interference cannot be permitted, and I have come to tell you so. This is the first time I have ever met with such an opposition to my policy, and I have resolved that it shall cease."

"But why do you tell me this?" said Isabel.
"Do you consider me responsible for these reforms?"

“Yes, certainly. Do you think I’m not aware that *you* have prompted them? In Astia, remember, everything is known. You, a stranger, are exerting an influence over his Majesty which I declare to be against his interests and against the State’s. I regret to speak so plainly, but to varnish truth is not my practice. I state that your interference in our national affairs is unheard of, monstrous. I repeat that it must cease.”

“Who rules, Count, in this country: The King, the Parliament—or you?”

At this the anger of the Count increased, and his face grew pale with it.

“Ah, that is it,” he said, “I’m doubly sure I was not wrong. Here is the perverse intellect I have perceived at work since my return, here is the spirit of rebellion against established things! You want to know who rules. I will not answer such a question. Before long you will find out.”

“The sooner the better,” Isabel replied, “for I confess that I am puzzled. As to what you term my interference, it is true that I have interfered, if the giving of some modest counsels may be so described. Yes, I have interfered and intend to interfere.”

“You intend——” the Minister began, then stopped, as if his utterance were checked by the enormity of the declaration. “It is plainly evident that you have come here to make discord.

Profiting by the inexplicable favour of his Majesty you seek to introduce subversive measures. For what reason are you doing this? I form my own conclusions."

"Form what conclusions you think fit," said Isabel beginning to be nettled. "I subvert nothing. I would only like to see a little order in the chaos you appear to like."

"Madam," said Stonor, drawing himself up to his full height and looking at her from it, "in the present age your sex has much audacity, but I have not met one as yet so bold."

"It's a new experience, Count."

"It's one from which, in this land, we are fortunately free."

"I think," said Isabel after a pause, "it would be well if we gave up personalities and tried to understand in which way our views conflict. If you will condescend to discuss such matters with a woman, I should be obliged if you would tell me why you so object either to the better administration of the taxes or to the improvement of the national domains."

"Why I object?" repeated Stonor in an angry tone. "Because, because there is no need of change: the taxes are in the hands of a competent director."

"Who is none other than your cousin, Count."

"And what do you infer from that?"

"I merely state a fact. I draw no inference."

“And what of the domains?”

“They are hypothecated to another relative of yours?”

This time Stonor was unable to repress a movement of exasperation.

“Your veiled insinuations, madam, are insulting. You presume upon your sex’ privilege.”

“So much heat, Count, for a simple *constatation*! Do you not think that you had better take a seat and calm yourself before you go back to your politics?”

Instead of doing as she suggested, Stonor took a few paces to the right towards the door, and then retraced his steps.

“Tell me at once,” he said, “have you definitely decided to oppose me?”

“No, for I cannot think that what little influence I may possess can be opposed to yours, since I am on the side of right.”

“Or what you take to be the right. But I will not discuss with you. I will confine myself to giving you a warning that if from henceforth I should find you thwarting me, I shall take measures to protect my country from this foreign influence which threatens it. We are not powerless in Astia, even when we have to deal with those who have obtained the favour of the throne.”

He paused a moment, keeping his eyes fixed upon her. Then, folding his arms, he said:

" Vincent, the Socialist, it seems, is coming to the congress. It's well. We shall know how to deal with him. He, at all events, is no friend of his Majesty."

" But he's a friend of mine."

" I do not see that gives him any claim to our protection, so good morning."

The Count withdrew. Then, after a few moments' reflection, Isabel wrote a telegram to Vincent. " Better not come to congress. Powerful influence against you," receiving a reply in the afternoon: " Care nothing for powerful influence; coming to-morrow night."

" Ah, well," she said to Maud as she read the message, " things are growing complicated. I wonder how it will all end."

" Just as you wish it, dear. It's you that are holding the reins now."

" But, Maud, just think of it! I have defied the virtual ruler of the land. He was so incensed that I fancy he could have killed me. He insulted me as much as possible. It's fortunate that I was born phlegmatic."

" Will you tell the King?" asked Maud with a sly smile.

" No. I like to leave things to take their natural development. Let Stonor play for his stakes unmolested while we play for our own. Eventually it will be seen who holds the winning card."

Two days afterwards, early in the morning,

while Isabel was breakfasting, Vincent suddenly appeared. As he entered Isabel shook her head.

"You should have kept away," she said. "Considering your situation *vis-à-vis* the family, it would have been better taste."

"I did not think of them," he answered, "they have never thought of me. I came because my colleagues asked me to be here. This is the most important congress we have ever had, and I look for great events."

Isabel contemplated him a moment. Then she said:

"Do you really think that great events take place at a meeting of that kind at present?"

"Why not? If our hopes are realised, the greatest impeachment of capital and class will be made that was ever heard, and who knows what may flow from it?"

"But, my dear Vincent, you are a capitalist yourself, and as for class, well, your descent is individually illustrious."

"Ah, it's plain that in mixing with these people you've contracted their ideas. No, I am no great capitalist. Much of what I earn is devoted to the cause, and as for my descent, that was an accident for which you will admit I'm not responsible."

"Enthusiast! But I fear you've still to learn the real value of all causes in this world, that they're not superior to the men who make them. But let that rest. For the present we had better

talk of your position here. Stonor, the Prime Minister, has heard of you, and he means to be disagreeable, as he let me understand not more than two days since. Therefore you may depend that the police are already giving you an escort whichever way you turn, and that if you say revolutionary things to-day you'll be arrested."

"That does not trouble me. Does Stonor know my origin?"

"I do not think so. But Robert of Varlemon is here, and he has guessed it."

"I shouldn't like it to be thought I've come to attract attention to my parentage."

"But that's what many will conclude."

Vincent reflected for a moment. Then he said:

"After all, I do not care. A man's a man, whoever his progenitors may be."

"He's none the less a man because his father was a royalty."

"I'm glad you think so, for I feared you had a prejudice against my birth."

"When prejudice creeps into my mind, I do my best to cast it out."

"Yes, for you are a superior woman, one who is high above the level of her sex. But tell me how long do you intend to stay in Astia?"

"Until I've settled one or two matters for the King."

"Take care, they tell me scandal's always rife here."

"So you have heard that too, and perhaps you've come to sermon me like Duke Robert—from the most disinterested motives in the world. If so, I warn you, I should soon begin to yawn."

"No, no, I've come to ask you to be at the meeting in the Central Hall this afternoon. I want you to hear what's said in the hope that you may think better of us than you do."

"So that I may be converted to the 'Cause'? No, Vincent, if I went I should be compromised and should not be converted. I have heard and read all your party has to say, and it has not convinced me. I've picked out for myself all that is real in your creed and accepted it, discarding the chimeras. I prophesy, my friend, that the thing will end in compromise. What is just and feasible (a small proportion) will be adopted, the rest will vanish. There!"

"We have faith that all our programme will be adopted in a not far distant future."

"Yes, you believe in your system as a votary in his religion. It's well there are more like you or the world would accomplish less."

"You really are against us."

"Again the spirit of the partisan! I am against nobody."

"And *for* nobody."

"That is not quite right. I am for you when you talk sense."

"You are still elusive as before. No one can gauge your meaning."

"Do not try, but sit down here and take a cup of tea. I should have been glad to see you at the meeting, because for all I say, I like your independence, but you have my best wishes for your oratorical success."

Taking the seat she offered and the cup, Vincent said:

"If you had been there I should have had double *verve*."

"Never, Vincent, seek any of your strength from women. To do so proves your store of energy, self-confidence, resistance, smaller than it should be, and that is a defect. A strong man should find his strength in himself alone."

"That is the individualistic point of view."

"In the present day there is no other. You will find the principle at work on all sides—even in your midst!"

"That is unfortunately true, but I hope the time will come when we shall have got rid of the self-seekers."

"That time will never come."

"Do you think so poorly, then, of human nature?"

"Human nature is not superior to itself, and it's useless to attempt to make it."

"Ah, well, I prefer to think it better than perhaps it is."

"As you will, Vincent."

"And now," she said as he was leaving, "there is one thing I wish to impress upon you."

Whatever you say to-day, not a word against the King! If you uttered a syllable against him, not only would you be arrested, but you would exhibit the worst of taste and seriously displease me."

"Of course," said Vincent with decision, "of course I shall not allude to him. I assure you I have better themes."

Isabel smiled, and Vincent left after she had invited him to dinner for the following day if, as she said, he was still at large.

He had not long left when Isabel was called to the telephone which was fixed in the boudoir.

It was the King's voice she recognised as soon as she put the instrument to her ear.

Since the telephone had been installed the previous day in the Villa Oriol, this was the first communication from the palace which she had received, and she easily foresaw it would not be the last. Charles said, seemingly in agitation:

"My dear friend, I'm obliged to use the telephone because I am a prisoner to-day. But you can speak as freely as if I were at your side. I am alone here in my study, and the wire is quite clear. Tell me, I beseech you, who is this Vincent, the Socialistic playwright whom I met in London. It seems that he has come over for the congress, and I hear the most extraordinary things about his origin. I believe that you can tell me who he is."

"I can, but for the moment, until the congress closes, I would crave to be excused."

—“But there’s a perfect storm at home. My sister is beside herself. The revolutionary press is throwing out the darkest hints, and Stonor says that an enormous scandal has been silently prepared.”

“Vincent is the best and kindest-hearted man it’s possible to meet, and I answer for him that he will behave himself while here. More, I cannot say as yet. Have patience and the truth will be revealed.”

“Yes, but how am I to quiet Ellen?”

“Tell the Princess that he’s very inoffensive.”

“Yes, but if he—I meant to say if there are reasons to believe that your friend is what Robert thinks, why then of course it’s awkward.”

“I would venture to advise your Majesty to take no heed of this, but to continue steadfastly the labour of reform.”

“For Heaven’s sake drop the Majesty. I shall try to follow your advice, but you do not know my sister. In family affairs she’s terrible. She has a set of adamant principles which no one can break. But tell me how are you to-day? I can see you in your little room surrounded by your nick-nacks, and I almost feel that I am basking in the sunshine of your presence. You have the power of making me feel happy whenever I am with you. Why, I ask again, am I not always at your side?”

If Charles could have beheld her, he would have seen her eyes suffused with moisture. But

he could not, and the only answer he received was :

“ Because we are too far apart ! ”

Isabel's first act as soon as she had replaced the mouthpiece on its stand was to send for all the journals of the capital in order that she might ascertain the current of opinion. They all devoted space to the gatherings of the Socialists, for Socialism was gaining ground in Ostia with great rapidity. None, however, alluded specially to the personality of Vincent except the Socialistic sheets, and they insinuated that the young dramatist had experienced the worst features of the capitalist régime in the matter of his birth, and that he was therefore doubly entitled to the esteem of all free men. And then followed quotations from Vincent's play and a short account of his career.

During the day Isabel felt somewhat restless, staying at home and receiving the evening papers as they appeared. The congress had opened peaceably enough. The members of committees were appointed and much preliminary work was done. Towards the afternoon, however, principles began to be discussed, and the proceedings became animated. Speaker after speaker made the same denunciations. Capital and class were vituperated in strangely similar terms until at length the time came for the settlement of certain points of dogma which had been left unsettled at the previous meeting. Upon this, it seemed, the

delegates had split into two camps. On the one side were the ultramontanes and on the other those who were in favour of concessions. One of the former accused Vincent of being a bad Socialist, of leaning to the class from whence he sprung, and this aspersion Vincent vehemently denied, declaring that he had always been consistent and had always voted for the abolition of class rule.

"Would you," the adversary asked, abolish monarchies?"

"Yes, in every country of the world, for I consider them as obstacles to social progress in the present age." At this point, the report declared, the police appeared upon the scene, and demanded the withdrawal of the word which Vincent had employed to designate the kings. Upon his refusal he was led out by the Chief Commissioner, and at this stage the reporter left.

"What folly!" Isabel exclaimed, throwing down the paper in annoyance. He had not spoken ill of Charles, but he had said all kings were pests, and that, in the eyes of a hypersensitive police, was an offence.

"Simpletons all round," she said, "naïve enthusiasts, who can't see farther than the limits of their creed!"

And she sat down to dinner in a discontented frame of mind.

The last editions of the papers confirmed the

news of the arrest of Vincent, but gave few details, and Isabel was left to wonder what the sequel was to be. Suddenly a call came from the telephone. Charles asked if she could see him in an hour upon urgent business. "Yes, come," she answered, "for I want to talk things over."

It was, however, nearly two hours before Charles arrived. He had been detained, he said, by Ministers and then by the Prefect of Police. He paused some moments before he broached the subject of his visit. He said at length :

"This Vincent!"

"Well," said Isabel, "it seems that he has been arrested."

He rose from the chair which he had first taken and sat beside her on the couch.

"My dear friend," he began, "I am in a very difficult position. You have heard that Vincent has been arrested for saying that we are pests. Now, if we had to deal with an ordinary Socialist, it would not matter in the least. We should have him conducted speedily across the frontier, and all would be said and done. But Vincent is no ordinary Socialist. He is a man for whose existence, it is whispered, a near relative of mine was once responsible. At first I did not credit it, but I wired to London yesterday, and the answer I received confirms the rumours. Nevertheless I want to be assured by you that this man is my uncle's child."

"Does the treatment he will receive depend upon my answer?"

"To a great extent it does."

"Will he be better dealt with if I say yes than if I answer no?"

"Can you doubt that I should have more regard for him if you say yes?"

"In that case, though I'm not sure I am acting rightly, I confess the truth: he is the son of the Duke Ferdinand."

"Ah, I was sure of it. Poor fellow! Left to struggle in the world alone, unrecognised, and to contract this folly! But it was ill-advised of him to come here at this time. The situation, as I said, is difficult, and I am harassed on all sides about him. My sister declares it is a family disgrace, and that he should be offered a sum to keep away. Stonor insists upon the police being supported in the rough treatment they usually mete out to offenders of that kind. Robert declares that the publicity of the whole thing will give a precious arm to the opponents of the monarchy, and that I owe it to my uncle's memory to denounce this man as an impostor, notwithstanding that he has not himself declared his parentage in Astia."

"The little prig!" said Isabel, moved by her sense of the enormity of Robert's advice out of her ordinary reticence.

"But that, of course, I cannot do. And yet the fact remains that the publicity which this affair is bound to have is damaging."

"In the meantime," Isabel said, without noticing his last remark, "what is to be the fate of Vincent?"

"I'm afraid he will have to be expelled, but I have given the strictest orders that he is to be treated with every possible consideration."

"Excuse me," said Isabel, "but I scarcely know whether I am speaking to the kind, good-hearted sovereign whom I have been accustomed to see here, or to someone else?"

"How so, dear friend?"

"I could not think that knowing him to be a cousin, and a true one, your Majesty would let him leave the country without seeing him."

"But, my dear friend, I do not think he would receive me, these Socialists are so exclusive, I am told."

"Oh, I will undertake," said Isabel, "to obtain an audience."

Charles reflected. "You interest yourself exceedingly for Vincent," he said at length. "Is he, by chance, the favoured one?"

"No. He is but a friend for whom I'm asking sympathy."

"If it can be managed secretly, I shall see him, but I can't help saying that I'm glad he got himself expelled. Friends for whom sympathy is asked are dangerous."

"The sympathy in this case should be given without being asked."

"I know; but have you never heard that love was capable of making its victims hard?"

"Yes, but I ought not to excuse you on that score."

"Why not? You know my state, for I have not disguised it. You know that I am hoping, waiting day by day for some sign of clemency."

"At present let us talk of clemency to Vincent."

"Have I not granted it?"

"Assuredly, and I propose that the meeting shall take place here."

Charles assented. "As long as my sister does not get to hear of it," he said.

"And what would happen if she did? Would the earth quake and the stars descend?"

"No, but I should pass a terrible *quart d'heure*."

"It strikes me that one of the conditions of a happy life is the courage to brave such quarters of an hour."

"No doubt, dear friend. But you speak as one enjoying freedom. Remember that we are not born free."

"Ah, yes, I forgot that little difference."

"You wouldn't exchange your lot for ours?"

"I'm afraid I wouldn't."

Charles heaved a long deep sigh. "Who would envy us?" he asked, to which she answered: "Many."

"Many, yes, perhaps, but none like you."

"But surely," she asked, "you don't want to be envied?"

"No. My wish is to be loved!"

"Tell me," she said, gazing fearlessly into his face, "has no woman ever loved you?"

"None. Many have pretended to, but none have been sincere."

Isabel turned away her face that he might not see the emotion it betrayed, and after a long pause said:

"That is unfortunate!"

Almost immediately, however, she sprang to her feet and cried:

"There is no time to be lost—a message to the authorities to release Vincent on his undertaking to leave to-night—here is some paper. I, on my part, will send him an order to come here as soon as he is free."

Charles complied without a word, and a messenger was at once despatched.

An hour elapsed, during which Charles told her the story of his life—how he had been brought up with his sister in the mountain Castle of Vianda, surrounded by governesses and by tutors; how he had gone to the university, where he had been the most unruly and unstudious of all students past and present; how he had been called upon to play the part of King upon his father's death when he was only twenty, and knew no more about his duties than a peasant of navigation; how he had been married by his

family and Ministers to "cement" alliances and to conquer friendships; how he had done many foolish things and very few wise ones; but how he had always cherished the hope that some day he would meet a woman he could truly love. That day had come when he met her, but, alas, he had soon become aware that fortune had only partly favoured him since his love was unreturned. He had hoped and hoped again, but there was an English proverb, he believed, which said that hope deferred made the heart sick!"

"Yes," said Isabel, "it must come to that. We cannot too long hope in vain. Nature has arranged it so that there is a limit to our hoping powers."

"All the same," said Charles, "I'm far from having reached it yet."

"Such patience," Isabel said, "is worthy of a better cause!"

At length he rose; went up to the piano and played to her some of the *Liede ohne Worte*, while, as before, she listened dreamily. Presently the door opened, and both looked up suddenly. It was only Maud returning from a party at a neighbour's house, and she withdrew almost immediately.

It was nearly midnight before a loud knock at the outer door was heard, and presently Vincent entered.

He started when he saw Charles, drew back a pace, and looked at Isabel for an explanation.

But Charles advanced towards him, and, with outstretched hand, said :

"Come in, Mr. Vincent. We are not strangers to each other since we met in London. It seems that in consequence of some expression used by you at the Socialistic congress, you have had a little fuss with our police. But as soon as I heard who you really were, I gave orders for your instant liberation. I hope you are none the worse for your detention."

Vincent was obliged to take the proffered hand, but he did so with evident disinclination.

"It is then to you, King Charles, that I owe my speedily acquired freedom."

"Chiefly to Lady Strange, who told me of your case."

Vincent bowed to Isabel and Charles. "I thank you."

There was a silence which no one seemed inclined to break. At length it was Isabel who spoke :

"Acting on my sense of fitness, I have told his Majesty the relationship which exists between you, and which is so apparent."

Vincent quickly said : "I have never claimed it !"

"I know," said Charles ; "from what I know of Socialists, I am inclined to think that you would not be altogether proud of it. But I assure you—my cousin—we're not such dreadful people as we're sometimes held to be, especially in plays."

Vincent, however, remained silent, glancing at Isabel and Charles with a gesture of uncertainty.

"Yes, Vincent," Isabel confirmed, "princes are not quite so callous and irresponsible as some among you say."

"I am a proof of the irresponsibility," he answered.

"Well, well, in other spheres these things occur, and it is not right to eternally bear rancour for them. His Majesty holds the memory of his uncle dear, and, if you were not a Socialist, would grant to you a new name here, a titled name that all must needs respect."

While Isabel was saying this, Charles had endeavoured to make a sign to her, murmuring at length as she did not notice it: "My sister!"

"Yes, yes, I know," she said, "the prejudice of the Princess. We would dispose of it. Even she would see the force of a solution of that kind."

"You are not serious," said Vincent, "or if you are, you must have thought I have been trifling all these years. I understood that you held democratic views, and yet I find you advocating such a plan!"

"I proposed it simply as the only means by which some reparation might be made you for the social disability you suffer."

Vincent answered: "I have the esteem of my party friends."

"Yet one of them the other day declared that a man of royal origin should not be tolerated in their ranks."

"I know he said so, but he was himself the grandson of a Polish Count."

And Vincent added:

"What I do not understand is that I should find you here, in this villa, at this hour, making offers on a king's behalf."

"And I have to tell you, Vincent, that if it seems strange to you, then you must endeavour to conceive it natural, since natural it is."

Vincent did not answer, but he kept his eyes fixed on Isabel, who sustained his gaze.

"I should like you to believe," Charles said at once, "that I came here to-night on your account. Lady Isabel, who is my most valued counsellor, suggested we should meet."

"Well, we have met, but I don't know for what purpose. Between you and I, King Charles, there cannot be much in common."

"That is an error," declared Isabel. "To begin with there is descent. In the next place, there is likeness, and in the next, high spirit!"

"I daresay, if we tried," the King said somewhat grimly, "we should find that we had the same taste."

"Tastes," suggested Isabel, but Charles shook his head.

"No taste."

"It's probable!" said Vincent slowly, his

gaze still fixed on Isabel, who promptly changed the theme.

"Come, come," she said impatiently, "let us talk of serious things. What I want to do is to find for both a common measure. I would like to hit upon a mean. I should like the King to be more socialistic, and the Socialist more reactionary, each in a certain specified degree."

At this, however, both Charles and Vincent uttered protests.

"No, that is impossible."

"What! are you so wedded to your tenets that you can neither subtract nor add? Are you so iron-bound in them?"

"I'm afraid I am," Charles said, "for I have noticed that the more we give away, the more they want to take from us, and we have reached the limit. With our present number the progression stops. If we go farther, the result is Socialism. If Socialism goes farther than it has already gone, then anarchy results. And that is what will ultimately succeed it, if it ever gets its way."

"No," said Vincent, "for the reason that the advent of Socialism will synchronise with the perfect comprehension of the science of society and the government of all by all."

"By that time," Charles said, "the world will have begun to fritter off into the ether of the universe."

"On the contrary it will be still quite young."

"Have it as you will," said Charles. "Neither of us will be here to see."

"And now," said Vincent to Isabel, "I presume there is no longer any doubt left in your mind of the impossibility of reconciling our principles. If it was with that object you asked me to come here it was certainly in vain."

"Suppose," said Isabel, "that owing to a dispute with the nation, his Majesty had abdicated, and that on account of a disagreement with your colleagues you had left your sect, what then would happen? You would become two free men, and would remain so unless you fettered yourselves again to some fresh ideas. You could meet as cousins. Well that is how I should like you to meet now."

"I have done my best," said Charles.

"I know you have," said Isabel. "It is in Vincent that the perverse spirit dwells. Exorcise it, Vincent. Chase it out!"

But Vincent said: "How can I consider as a cousin one who by virtue of his caste can never publicly acknowledge such relationship? Those who act as my father did, penalise their offspring, who are allowed no relatives except mother, wife, and child."

"Well, after all," said Isabel, "that's quite enough."

"I think so," Vincent answered, "I have always thought so. But others do not share that view. When I asked the hand of the woman I

most love, she refused because, in spite of her denial, she was influenced by the eternal prejudice."

"I am certain," Charles said with great emphasis, "that the lady is here now."

Vincent was silent, and Charles took his silence as assent.

"Console yourself," he said, "the same fate has befallen me."

"What?" said Vincent with astonishment "I have still to learn that a reigning king can wed outside his sphere."

"He cannot, but he can relinquish being king, and that is what I would have done for the sake of the lady of my choice."

"Really," said Isabel, "this is embarrassing. I wish you would leave that lady out of the picture. I assure you she has no desire to step into it."

But Vincent had begun to move towards the door.

"Many things are clear to me," he said, "which were obscure before. I shall withdraw, for I have no place here."

"What do you mean by that?" enquired Isabel with warmth. "There is no need for such discretion."

"Let him go," said Charles, "before I lose my temper."

"I shall only stay," said Vincent, turning to Isabel, "if authorised by you."

"You forget," the King said with hauteur, "that you have been expelled, and that you have but another hour to remain in Astia."

"Go, Vincent," Isabel said, "for you must keep your word. Go, and think evil of me if you dare."

Vincent gave one long glance at Isabel. Then he turned and left.

As soon as the door was closed, Isabel said:

"A nice ending to my efforts at reconciliation!"

"Ah, but the man is irreconcilable! His paternity is always in his mind. Beneath his apparent calm there's rage."

"Well, it's your scamp of an uncle who is responsible for the state in which he lives. Ah, my friend, the least that a royal duke should do is to lead a model life. If you people are placed on pedestals you must adorn them: otherwise I'm not in favour of installing you."

"You are right, dear friend, we ought to lead a model life or we are shams. But do you think our people like a very moral king? Oh, no, it's quite the contrary."

"Why, then, is there so much pother over Vincent?"

"It's all political."

"Why, then, does the Princess wail?"

"That is different. It's a tradition of our house that no irregularity shall be admitted, and the women are the guardians of our traditions. That is how it is!"

"Traditions of that kind would drive me to Socialism too."

"Well, I do not hold to them. I have offered to abandon all for you!"

"And I have not accepted, and to-night I feel how dangerous our friendship is to both of us."

"There must be some lurking fondness for my inauthentic cousin in that heart of hearts, or you would not speak like that."

"Oh, to-night the heart is very void and the brain is numbed."

"You are tired by the emotions of the day and the lateness of the hour. I shall retire, especially as I have yet to see my press communicator to put the Vincent matter straight, if possible. Adieu, and if you dream, dream not of Socialists!"

Isabel was about to seek her room when suddenly a loud knock at the villa door caused her to start back. Presently her tired maid appeared informing her protestingly that the Duke of Varlemon was there. She hesitated for a moment. Then she said that she would see him. Robert entered, his face flushed.

"I have been supping with some friends hard by," he said, "and I fancied I should like to pay a visit to the enchanting and mysterious Lady Isabel in her retreat, to assure her once again of my devotion."

"You are well advised to come to-night," she said. "So it was you who told the King that he owed it to the memory of his uncle to brand my

good friend Vincent as an impostor, although you knew that he was perfectly authentic—in his way? Is that a sample of your methods? If so, you'll let me tell you, Duke, that they are of a kind for which I have no admiration."

"I plead," said Robert excitedly, "the reason of State, the reason of State. Do you know what that implies? Charles' throne itself was menaced by this scandal, and I conceived it was my duty to suggest a means to avert the danger. Thrones often totter, I assure you, and especially in Astia. They need at times resource and ingenuity to keep them up. Now Charles, unfortunately, lacks these qualities which I possess; yes, yes, it was a necessary thing to do, a necessary thing! We must protect ourselves against our enemies, self-preservation is the first of nature's laws. But Charles will be certainly too weak to act on my advice, and the scandal will blaze forth to-morrow with a lurid light, a lurid light, like a great marsh fire over Astia. Aha, it will be a mighty conflagration."

"Listen," said Isabel in a threatening tone, "listen, and try to understand, if your supper has left you wits enough. If you do not go back to the palace and wait until the King arrives and tell him that you made a great mistake and that the best thing he can do is to say nothing, this is the last time we shall meet."

"Oh, but I have just arrived. Surely you will not send me from you quite so soon to talk to

Charles about this little Socialist. Fancy what a figure I shall cut when I tell him that the reason of State is not a reason, and that there is no longer to be reason in the State."

"Good-bye," said Isabel abruptly, "we will resume this conversation when you have a clearer head."

"No, no, no," he cried, "I cannot, and I will not go. I came here to see, to feast my eyes on you, and that I am determined I shall do. Aha, you can't prevent me. I am Robert of Varlemon. You can't dismiss me like a lackey. You must smile to me. You must, you must."

Isabel, somewhat alarmed, retreated a few paces towards the door, but he, perceiving her movement, placed himself before it.

"You must not go. I will not, cannot let you go."

"Do you want to make yourself ridiculous, as you did last time you came to me in London?"

"I, ridiculous?" said Robert drawing himself together with great dignity. "A Varlemon is never so. Three hundred years ago one of us declared that none should ever mock us with impunity. If a man did that, he must be slain, and if a woman, she was to be seized and——"

A laugh from Isabel interrupted him, and he was about to advance towards her when she pressed a knob in the panel of the wall and disappeared into an inner room which Maud had discovered the day before, closing the door after

her. From thence she reached the garden staircase and waited in the garden a few minutes till she saw the half-inebriated Duke depart.

Then she mounted to her room ejaculating :

“ Oh, the puppet ! ”

The next day, as Isabel was relating the incident to Maud, half in mirth and half in anger, a letter arrived from Robert, expressing his sincere heartfelt regret for having called upon her the night before in what he feared was a somewhat “ incoherent ” state. If he had said anything extravagant, he implored her to forget it, and to attribute it to the treachery of a too generous vintage wine which the obligations of conviviality had caused him to consume. Much, he thought, too, should be pardoned to a man in his position, and though he did not state what he meant by that, she readily inferred that he alluded to his inæsthetic marriage. Would she permit him to come and make apologies in person ? To this she promptly answered no, advising him to return to England, where she, when next there, might reconsider her decree. In high dudgeon Robert left, called back to England by his aunt on State affairs.

CHAPTER VIII.

THREE months elapsed, during which the reforms which had been inaugurated were steadily pursued by Charles, who from the outset found them popular. Each day he talked with Isabel on the telephone, into which he poured his sentiments without constraint. He was bolder, he said, upon this instrument, and she more kind. For the rest, it was the only means whereby they might talk daily without giving colour to the rumours which were ever in the air, and as he locked the door of his study before he spoke with her, he was certain that he was not overheard. Gradually Isabel, who had summoned a skilled accountant from London to her aid, succeeded in putting in order the King's estate and in originating methods of exploitation which promised to greatly increase his revenues. The sale of a concession of mining rights brought a large increase alone, and Isabel was successful in inducing Charles to begin to pay his debt to Peterus.

"My dear friend," he telephoned one day, "in a few short months this land will be a paradise on earth, and who will have wrought this change? Who but the best of counsellors, the fairest and

the wisest of all friends? Ah, it has been amusing to turn over so many stones and catch the eels which lay beneath them! How they wriggled! How they writhed! There was going to be honesty in Astia. One has committed suicide, another has departed to the wilds of Africa, another is reduced to beggary. Yes, all that is very well, but there are clouds on the horizon! Two royal dowagers are coming here to-morrow to confer with my sister about a queen for me. The people seem to think it is my duty to provide the country with an heir, and it won't be long before I get unpopular if I decline. I don't know how it will all end, but I'm living my life gently without troubling, happy in the thought that you are near, that I can talk to you each day and see you now and then. My experience of life has taught me that a solution comes to every fix if we only give it time. Don't laugh at my philosophy!"

Then Isabel replied: "Yes, that is true! Out of the lap of circumstance the solution comes: only it is not always such as we desire, or as we deserve. In the meantime, I wish that I could give advice that might hasten the unravelling, but of late I find myself unable to construct a plan. In fact, as I said before, I think I'd rather not interfere in the question of the succession. Not being a native, I'm afraid I can't quite realise the objection which the people seem to have to nephews as successors, but I quite agree that the

best thing to be done is to wait events. I only want to see you set up on a proper basis, and then I must return to England. My mission will be ended."

Excited protestations came along the wire at this declaration. "No, a thousand times, you must not go, my mascot and my life. If you were not there in the Villa Oriol I should lose my zest in everything and become as one asleep!"

One day Isabel was waiting for the accustomed call which generally came at six. It was more than half-past six, and yet the instrument was silent. She concluded that some unexpected business must have prevented Charles from coming to the telephone, and she was wondering what this might be, when suddenly the door opened and Maud rushed in with an evening paper.

"An Anarchist," she cried, "has shot his Majesty!"

Isabel grew pale. "What?" she faltered, "shot?—not dead?"

"No, but wounded—read."

She handed Isabel the journal. As Charles was leaving the Eastern Barracks, where he had spent the afternoon inspecting some new guns, an Anarchist had fired at him, and the bullet had struck him in the breast, high up near the armpit. He had been taken to the palace in a half-unconscious state. That was all that was then known.

Isabel wrung her hands. "I cannot go to

him. They would not admit me. In their eyes I am an interloper, a stranger whom they would expel. Ah, this kingship! Too great a price is paid for it."

She rang for a servant and directed him to go to the palace and wait there till the King's condition was declared, and then return to tell her of it.

"I remember the man who was lurking in the woods," she said to Maud, "the day I met him there. I feared that some day he might be attacked. After all these kings are, as Professor Miles once said, 'big game' for any malcontent who chooses to pay for the sport of shooting them with his own life. But as his own life is usually wretched, he considers, no doubt, that the price is not too high!"

"To me," said Maud, "it seems that Anarchists and Socialists and all that brood should be simply hunted down and caught and put upon an island where they could practise on each other. That would be the proper way to deal with them: then kings could breathe more freely."

"Yes," was Isabel's reply, "but the island would have to be of a tremendous size, because although the Anarchists would no doubt exterminate a few, the principles which some of the English Socialists propound would result, if followed, in a tremendous population. But why are we talking of such things when the poor man is lying over there, perhaps in danger of his life?"

"It seems almost comic," said Maud ruefully, "that a king should be at the mercy of those devils!"

"Yes, it is almost comic!"

At length, when the servant returned, they learnt that the King was considered out of danger, that the bullet had been found, and that it would be extracted soon. A crowd of enormous size stood before the palace, and the sympathy which it displayed was boundless. In spite of all, Charles was the people's favourite; not because he did very much for them, but, as ever, because he was gay and debonair, and that won the people's hearts.

For days, while Charles was being treated, the journals which supported him surpassed each other in the expression of their horror at the crime, using such adjectives as dastardly, fiendish, and treacherous to stigmatise the deed, the perpetrator of which, they said, was the dreg and shame of our humanity. But in a week, when the King was rapidly recovering and the Anarchist was being brought to justice, their vehemence soon subsided, and they resumed their politics as if nothing had occurred. This incident, however, interrupted the talks by telephone. It was not until the third week from the shooting that Isabel heard the familiar call at six o'clock and joyfully heard Charles exclaim:

"At last! Ah, what a tedious time I have been having since that idiot put his bit of lead

into my chest. They wouldn't let me get up to the telephone, and I could scarcely catch a sight of the beautiful white roses that you sent. But now I am beginning to make my own will felt, and am looking forward to the enormous pleasure of seeing you again. All around me they are fêting my recovery, making me feel as though I were of some good in the world. All the same, it's rather hard to be a target, and I do think that you will admit that in respect of Anarchists, one's better off than on the throne."

At length one day he came, his face thin and his eyes deeply sunk in their sockets.

His first act was to seize both her hands and to hold them long in his.

"When I felt myself hit," he said, "and did not know if the blow was the last I should receive, my thought was instantly of you! Does not that prove that you are *always* in my thoughts?"

"When I heard," she answered, "that you had been shot it was as though I had been shot myself! Does not that prove that ties of friendship are as strong as any?"

"I hope," he answered, "there may have been a little more than friendship?"

Isabel was silent. He pursued:

"Sometimes I think that you do not altogether *realise* yourself! While I was lying there, a prisoner in bed, I often told myself that it was not quite possible that what I felt for you should not have some echo in your heart!"

Still Isabel was silent, though her lips twitched nervously.

"I knew that when you heard what had befallen me you would be troubled, and I will confess that I was egotistical enough to find a certain pleasure in that thought."

Isabel at length said slowly: "You must not ask what I must not give. A king should know how difficult is my position."

"It need not have been difficult. If you had consented to my plan, all would have been simple. I should not have been the first to give up kingship."

"Alas, we have discussed that once before, and the more I think of it the more I am convinced that had I let you carry out that plan the result would have been suicidal for your dignity and happiness. What is an abdicated king? A *ci-devant*, a relic of a former state. It's one of the penalties which royal people have to pay for royalty, that by the will of other men they cannot be as other men. They must live and die upon a plane apart, whether they exercise their rights or not. Trace the subsequent career of those who have resigned and you will find that it is not auspicious, that they do not find the happiness they seek, that their lives are wasted lives."

"I could wish," said Charles, "that you would allow for once a little folly to come into your life. Ah, you don't know how necessary it is to us mortals to be irrational at times!"

"This is the argument which I have heard before or one not much unlike it. But fortunately it can't convince me. In the course of my career I have formed convictions, based on my experience of life, and I have rarely found them wrong. Therefore I must bow to fate."

"No, no, the fate is of your making, and you need not bow to it. My creed is that we can all do what we wish, if we really wish to do it."

"I know, I know, but, alas, I'm sceptical. We can only do in comfort what others don't object to our doing. That is the servitude of human beings in society."

"But," said Charles after a moment's pause, "you say that I could not be happy if I took the step that seems to you so grave. But do you think I shall be happy if I wed the Princess they have chosen for me, a kind of stable woman who can talk of nothing but horse breeding? Look at Robert. There is an example for you. It's actually made him take to drink!"

"I know, and I would like to save you from his fate. Why wed a Princess Agatha? Is there no other?"

"No, the supply has suddenly run short. My sister has been scouring the Courts of Europe, and that's all she found!"

"Poor monarch!"

"You may well say that. But tell me, my dear friend, what is to be *your* future?"

"Lonely, I'm afraid, with some regrets."

"I shall come and share them!"

"No, that would not be allowed!"

"Adieu, I go away disconsolate!"

As he was leaving Charles turned back. "I forgot to say that among the letters I received was one from Vincent, expressing his sincere regret at hearing of the attempt upon my life."

"Well," said Isabel, "that was nice of him, I think."

"Yes, he's not quite the barbarian I took him for. It's a pity he is not wholly one of us."

"He's only half a fraction, certainly, but not a vulgar one."

"You always take up his defence."

"Yes, for I consider that he suffers a social wrong."

"Why did he not accept the title which you offered him?"

"Because he was too earnest in his creed."

"Ah, well, there's nothing to be done!"

"No, nothing."

"And we shall go on moving in a circle?"

"In a circle!"

"Alas, good-bye!"

"Good-bye!"

A month elapsed, during which Isabel, who was supported only by the King at the Court, went little into society. All her projects of reform had been well received, and there was

every prospect of successful issues. Her equanimity, however, was almost daily put to test by the anonymous communications she continued to receive accusing her of every machination against the State and against its ruler. This, and the feeling that she could be of no more use to Charles, caused her to think of returning home.

One morning, however, as she was taking her accustomed walk with Maud in the upper avenue of the park, she suddenly found herself face to face with Stonor. Her endeavour was to pass on, but he frustrated it.

"I beg your pardon," he said in a voice of authority, "but although you seek to avoid me it is necessary that I should speak with you. I was informed that I should meet you here, and for that reason I have come. Be good enough to cross over to that seat, where we shall be less observed, and I beg that this lady will leave us for a short time."

Isabel did as he requested, and Maud took another seat some hundred yards away.

"Now," said Stonor, "in the first place I shall compliment you on your talent. You have pointed out a series of reforms of which his Majesty approves, and which I have undertaken to effect, however much I may have thought that the same results might have been attained by other means. But, as I said, you have been successful in obtaining a hearing for your

innovations, and that appears to me to prove in you capacity of no ordinary kind. That being so, I can address myself to you in the present situation in the certainty that you will grasp the facts and draw the right conclusions. It is no secret in the kingdom that the King's relatives are desirous that he should marry a certain royal lady soon, so that the legitimate aspirations of the people may be fulfilled, aspirations which are even more intense since the recent outrage. Now there exists an obstacle, the obstacle on which I believe I touched at our last interview, the unfortunate attachment which his Majesty has formed for a lady whom you know."

"Why this indirectness, Count? Let us at least speak plainly."

"I prefer to use no names. Well, this lady knows, as we all know, that all hopes of marriage are denied her, and that her position here is against the interest of my august master and against her own, since she is now assailed by scandal—I hasten to add, unjustly."

"You may save yourself the trouble to develop further. The lady has already quite decided to pack up her trunks."

A smile of satisfaction showed itself upon the face of Stonor.

"I knew," he said, "that I was dealing with an intelligence, and I have to say that I regret that at our previous meeting I should have permitted myself to speak to you with insufficient

measure. I trust you will forget the words I used, which were due to heated feelings. And so you have determined to abandon us! To deprive us of your good advice, to sacrifice your sentiments to the good of Astia!"

"I said nothing of my sentiments. I merely intimated my intention of departing."

"Perhaps it is not so necessary that you should leave."

"I'm afraid I don't quite understand you, Count."

"Well, no doubt, I am obscure. What I meant was that if you agreed to the principle of the marriage as you have by signifying your willingness to quit this country, it might not, after all, be needful you should go. I owe it to my august master not to deprive him of his—preferences—and therefore if you like to stay, it would not only be a means of inducing him to take kindly to this union, but also of gratifying any particular desire which you might have in that direction."

"I see," said Isabel with heightened colour. "In order that your master may be induced to marry this Princess, I am to be used as an incentive. What his subsequent relations with me would be, you do not ask, although it's plain that you would be rather pleased that they should be irregular. You are prepared to be indulgent to the favourite who keeps the King amused. Well now, Count Stonor, these may be the manners of

a monarchy, but if they are, I much prefer those of the roughest *plebs*, for they are much less likely to act as emetics when one thinks of them. I am glad, however, to have had an opportunity of learning them from so eminent an authority, because it modifies what liking I may once have had for the régime."

The smile had disappeared from Stonor's countenance and been replaced by a heavy frown.

"I thought," he said, "I was addressing one who possessed sufficient penetration to discern the unwritten rules of human things, but it seems I was mistaken. I take no heed of the inferences you choose to draw from what I said. Pursue your first intention, and go back to England. I shall at least be spared the trouble of your interference in our State affairs, and I shall see that our policy in no way suffers by your going."

He rose, made a formal bow, and left.

When Maud rejoined her, Isabel exclaimed:

"There goes a man who commands respect and admiration, who is the friend of Princes and Statesmen, yet who came here this morning to attempt to drag me to the level of a courtesan. At first I thought him a fine man; but now I know him to be something comically base."

"The old wretch," said Maud indignantly, adding when Isabel had told her what had passed: "If I had been in your place, Isabel, I should have called him all the names in the vocabulary, and more."

"I'm glad to think," said Isabel, "I kept my temper. Poor King! he is surrounded by a miserable set. A new broom should be used, and soon."

"No one so well as you could use it, dear."

But Isabel shook her head. "No, I've done as much as I was able, and now it's time to go."

"Well, I won't be sorry, for I heard last night that the Duke of Roxin, who has paid me so much court, is going to marry a Yankee millionairess."

"Poor Maud! And had you set your heart on that?"

Tears appeared in Maud's blue eyes. "A little!"

Isabel kissed her friend, and they walked back to the villa each with a saddened face.

That evening Isabel, not having spoken with him that day, took up her pen and wrote to Charles.

"Dear friend, I have at last decided to depart on Monday. I realise, I have been made to realise, that my presence here can no longer help you, but may hinder your material prospects. My stay in spite of all the abuse which has been levelled at me has been a happy one, because of our friendship, and I only wish we could continue our daily talks when I am far away in London. But that is not within the bounds of possibility at present, and even if it were it would be imprudent. We must accustom ourselves to the

conditions which are made for us by circumstance, and try to feel that all is for the best in the best of worlds. I know this optimism is not easy to acquire, but my experience of life has taught me that in all misfortunes there is a hidden good, and that it is for us to seek and find it. I know that you will not agree to this, but you will find, I think, that it is true. I do not know if we shall meet again before I leave, because I cannot come again to your palace, where the women look at me askance and the men assume an air of indulgent condescension, and our home-going has been fixed for Monday next. I believe it would be better if you did not come again, and yet I feel that I should like to give you just a few last words of what you have been pleased to call my wisdom. I shall be at home all day tomorrow.—Ever yours, I. S.

“PS.—Perhaps it is not safe that you should venture out alone. If so, pray do not come.”

The next day, towards four o'clock, Isabel, who had been busy all the morning making preparations for the return journey, waited in the little room at the side of the drawing-room, where she had so often spoken with the King upon the wire. As this would be the last interview, since Charles was due at a distant country town for the baptism of a ducal babe, she felt a little hopeful he would come, and when she saw him from the window walking up the path, her pleasure was apparent.

But his face was so grave that when he entered she exclaimed :

" Why what a rueful countenance ! Is there anything amiss ? "

" Can you ask that when *you* are going ! "

" Rejoice. The air will be clearer when I'm gone. "

" For me it will be unbreathable ! "

" No, you must not say that. You must make up your mind to breathe it vigorously. "

" But Isabel, you must let me call you Isabel for the last time, surely you do not realise the life to which you are condemning me, with a stable woman for a wife, a Spartan sister for a censor, and Stonor for eternal jars. I was beginning, in spite of all, to take some interest in things under your influence and instigation, but now all that is over. I shall be a soldier once again, and a rough one, seeking rather than avoiding wars. "

" No, no, that is the language of another age. If you were so unmindful of your people as to seek war without sufficient cause, you'd find you had the whole opinion of the world against you, and that no man could stand. "

" You're right, as usual, and therefore I am helpless, and I shall drift to I know not what and you will have had it in your power to prevent me drifting ! Ah, if you would only listen. But no, you have shut your ears to anything I say ! "

" I affirm to you that I have acted for the best.

For your welfare I have curbed my inclinations. That is all, I can do no more."

Charles said: "I shall be in London in a week."

"You will not find me there, for I shall be in Scotland."

"I shall go to Scotland."

"Then I shall have to be much firmer than I have been hitherto, and forbid you to pursue me."

Charles sighed. "If we lived in the Middle Ages, I should listen to no scruples, but carry you away to a distant castle in the hills."

"I should have soon escaped."

"I should have placed a ring of sentries round the castle."

"I should have won some of them to my cause."

"Those would have surely died."

"I'm afraid there lingers in you still some of the old barbaric spirit."

"Undoubtedly—in all of us."

"Let us talk seriously," said Isabel at length. "I should want to ask you to give me your very faithful promise that you will follow out the reforms that have been begun."

"Oh, no, I promise nothing."

"But you must. My *amour propre* is staked on the success of these reforms, and I see in them the means of placing Astia upon its legs again. If you will not promise, then we shall not part friends!"

Charles reflected for a moment. Then he said :

“ Oh, well, I promise. The reforms will be effected soon.”

“ And you will pay the Peteruses in full and become free.”

“ It shall be done.”

“ Then frown on Madame Peterus.”

“ It shall be done.”

“ And vanquish Stonor.”

“ If possible it shall be also done.”

“ And then forget the audacious woman who came for a season into your existence and prompted all these things.”

“ That, never, for she is engraved upon my heart.”

“ Well, then, there let her stay.”

“ I must be grateful even for that privilege from you.”

“ I am afraid,” she said after a pause, “ that in one respect you’re like the hero of Cervantes, who attributed to the lady of Toboso a thousand qualities and charms which she did not possess.”

“ No, for unlike Dulcinea, you do possess them.”

“ You overestimate; but once more we are trifling. Will you also promise to let me know from time to time how things are going here? ”

“ Yes, I will do more. I promise to give you at a not far distant date the text of a declaration I intend to make.”

“ Nothing rash, I hope.”

"No, but suited to the situation."

For some moments neither spoke. At length Charles drew from his breast pocket a small medallion portrait set in diamonds.

"Here," he said, "is a portrait of myself by Caravintolosky. I offer it to you."

Isabel took the miniature, admired it, and thrust it deep into her bodice.

"You see," she said, "I place it nearest to my heart."

Suddenly he seized her hands and pressed them, pouring out his gratitude in unmeasured terms.

Then he dived into his pocket once again, producing this time a decoration—a circle of gold inlaid with emeralds, enclosing what looked like the bough of a tree also wrought in gold, and beneath which was inscribed: "For worth and wisdom."

"Permit me," he said plaintively, "to offer you this final souvenir. Although you laughed at it, this Order is the highest that I have to give. One lady only in the land possesses it, and it has never yet been given to a stranger. For your advice and your assistance you are entitled to receive it."

"Would the bestowal be made public?"

"Necessarily, and it will be my pride to make it known."

"In that case I am afraid you must allow me to decline. As soon as it was known I had

accepted this, the suspicions of the people here would be confirmed. It would be said that the King was reverting to the customs of three centuries ago, when royal favourites were loaded with distinctions. In the present day, when kings have to mind what they're about, the royal favourite, although invited to house parties and the like, is not otherwise exalted. No, no. My warmest thanks, but I prefer to remain completely unadorned."

The King sighed. "You ought to let me give you this little token of esteem. I feel quite frustrated if you don't."

"I'm sorry to cause you that sensation, but I can't accept; both for the reason I have named and because my views of late on monarchy and its distinctions have been undergoing change."

"I knew it," Charles lamented. "You had always leanings to the other side! You will go back to London and summon Vincent and embrace his creed!"

"I do not think so, for I am not fond of tyranny in any form."

"Well," said Charles at length, "since you are obdurate, let me ask you to take the emblem only as a souvenir of the intention."

"Readily. I shall place it in my cabinet, which has large glass doors, and as often as I see it I shall be reminded of Your Majesty."

"You know you promised long ago that you would never call me that!"

"Forgive me, I forgot. I'm really glad to be excused, for it's a term I don't much like."

"Nor I, for it suggests that the remainder of the world are Liliputians, which some of them at least are not."

The clock struck five, and reluctantly Charles rose.

"A council of Ministers is waiting for me at the palace," he explained, "and I am already late. Good-bye, my counsellor and friend. Think over what I've said this afternoon, and when you're over there, if we cannot use the telephone, we can the telegraph. Wire me your thoughts as often as you can, scold me if you must, but do not remain silent!"

In another moment he was gone, and Isabel was left to her own rather sorrowful reflections.

"It's all over," she said to her companion as Maud came in. "He's gone!"

"And haven't you a heartache, dear?"

"I don't allow myself to feel."

"In your place I should be tortured with regret."

"Regret is the one thing in the world we must combat."

The Sunday passed, and Isabel heard no more of the King. On the following afternoon, however, as she was entering the sleeping car with Maud at the Central Station, the General, the King's aide-de-camp, appeared.

"His Majesty," he said, "desired me to come

and wish you a good journey. - He also wished that I should give you this." And he handed her a bunch of violets tied with ribbons of the Astian colours.

Isabel expressed her thanks, and the General enquired if he could be of any service.

"Yes," said Isabel, "to tell his Majesty, if you will be so good, that these violets shall be preserved and serve throughout my life as a memento of my happy visit to your land."

CHAPTER IX.

IN the early spring Mrs. Sydney was receiving a few friends. Isabel had just entered her drawing-room when she was at once questioned by her as to her stay in Astia.

"We have heard that you have done some great things over there!"

"Great! I'm afraid they were not, but I did the best I could."

"It's said that you've remodelled the Constitution."

"Oh, that is an exaggeration."

"But it's clever of you to have done anything at all."

"I can't imagine how my doings became known!"

"The ears of London are wider than you think. Tell me, have you seen the poor Duke since your return?"

"No, but why do you call him the poor Duke?"

"Because his wife has left him suddenly and gone back to her home."

"Indeed, and is it the poor Duke or the poor Duchess that one ought to say?"

Mrs. Sydney smiled. "Well, the Duke is a

friend of mine, and so I take his side. I know very little about it all beyond the fact that she has left."

"For a temporary absence, doubtless. Those people are too closely tied together by Church and by convention to drift apart."

"In the meantime he's having a *mauvais quart d'heure* at Redmont, where his aunt is furious at the estrangement. That's why, I think, he has come up to town. He will be here to-night. And the worst of it is I invited Professor Miles, forgetting how opposite their views were. I really hope they will not fight. My husband says they nearly did last time."

"Yes," confirmed Mrs. Sydney, "for Miles is a red Republican."

Upon this Miles entered. As he greeted Isabel he said:

"So I hear that since last we met you have been studying the forces of reaction. And how did they seem to you?"

"Blind, apparently, as other forces I have met."

"I am glad you said apparently, because although many of the social forces we encounter may seem destitute of reason there may be reason in them which we have not yet discerned."

"Yes," said Isabel at once, "I have often thought those energies are not without a purpose whichever way they tend."

"At the same time," said Miles with emphasis,

"we must take sides in harmony with our convictions. Some must act while others must react. That is the human rule."

"By whom or what is it imposed?"

"By nature."

Robert was announced.

He entered with his accustomed air of conscious dignity, and although his face appeared to Isabel to flush as soon as he perceived her, he did not lose his self-possession. As soon as he had spoken with the Sydneys he said to Isabel:

"We meet again, Lady Strange, this time in England. Have you any news of my cousin Charles?"

"When I left, two weeks ago, his Majesty was well."

"And preparing, I suppose, for his approaching marriage, which was announced to-day in the evening papers. It seems his future wife is the most accomplished horse-woman in the world."

Isabel's face betrayed no index of her thoughts or feelings.

"A horse-woman," she repeated. "Yes, that is more or less as he described her."

But Mrs. Sydney said: "You know Professor Miles, Duke," and Robert, who had affected to ignore Miles, made a frigid bow.

Throughout the dinner Mrs. Sydney did her best to keep the conversation free from politics, but afterwards it was brought round to them by

Robert, who incidentally declared that he had that day issued a fresh manifesto to his nation which reminded them of the advancing tide of lawlessness and irreligion, the disorder in the finances, and the corruption of all the officers of State. It grieved him to see his country drifting thus to its destruction."

Miles said: "The Prime Minister, who is a friend of mine, is the most upright man I know, and I feel convinced that he would never sit in a Cabinet of rogues. Your information on this point appears to be erroneous."

Robert answered: "It is obtained from the highest sources, and I have no hesitation in affirming that it is correct."

"If that were so, your country would rapidly degenerate and take a low place among nations. I am not aware that it has done that yet."

"It's a question of time unless our cause prevails."

But Isabel enquired: "What makes you be so sure, Duke, that your own adherents would be better than the men in power now?"

"My knowledge of their honour."

"But what of their capacity?"

"Superior. Immeasurably superior!"

Miles smiled incredulously, and as Robert was evidently growing vexed Mrs. Sydney changed the conversation, which continued upon generalities until Isabel rose and left.

Then Robert, who had appeared restless

throughout the evening, suddenly took leave, and when Isabel had put on her cloak and descended to the hall he was waiting for her there.

"I came to-night," he said, "expressly to meet you. Will you grant me the favour of an interview to-morrow?"

"Alone? No, no, my past experience forbids me to do that."

"I admit that at our last meeting I was in an—unfortunate—condition. But that was a passing aberration for which you should not hold me always at arm's length. What I have to say to you is of the utmost moment."

"I am all attention: say it now."

"What? In this hall? Do you not see the servants over there?"

"Well, I cannot let you come to me, lest you should be tempted to revert to the methods of your ancestors, which you explained to me, you may remember."

"You are cruel! You recall the mad things which my feelings prompted me to say when in your presence."

"You see I cannot tell when I should have the same effect on you again, and you know I'm only a frail woman, and really you must excuse me, for my motor's here."

"Do you mean to shut your door against me?"

"No, for in spite of all I take an interest in you, and I have never acquired our British art of

cutting. But you will excuse me if I cannot ask you—by yourself.”

“I see,” said Robert gloomily, “you have lost confidence in me!”

“All I can say is,” Isabel continued, moving to the door, “that if you ride at nine to-morrow in the park, you’ll find me riding too.”

“At nine I shall be there!”

“Alone? No, no, my past experience forbids upon the table in her room a letter bearing an Egyptian stamp.

Before she opened it she sat for some time thinking, the letter resting on her lap. Then she broke the seal.

“You remember when we met two years ago at Loch Geldie. I promised that I would bring you from the Soudan one of those saddle-bags you admired so at the MacGarth’s. Well, I did not forget my promise, and I succeeded in obtaining one of elaborate and curious workmanship. Alas, when I was ill with enteric, my servant, thinking I would not pull through, began to sell whatever property he could lay his hands upon, and your saddle-bag went with the rest. Here I have obtained another; but it’s a poor substitute, I fear, for the stolen one, and I am bringing it with very little hope that it will please. No matter, the theft has served me as a pretext to write to you, and for that privilege I almost forgive the thief. Two years is a long time to be away from home. My work is done at last,

however, and I am free. I often wonder what changes have taken place since I came out, because I have not always seen the papers and scarcely know the news. I hope that I shall find that there have been no changes, but it may be that I shall find some. The French have a saying that he who goes to the chase loses his place, and that may be my fate. Good-bye. I shall take an early opportunity on my return, in a few weeks, to send the saddle-bag and to call."

The letter was signed "Leslie Murray," and it was dated from Cairo only six days previously. Isabel read it twice, and then let it fall upon the floor.

Here was a man who took no side in politics, who had gone to Central Africa purely to gain knowledge of disease, and who had doubtless suffered. She remembered that her father had once praised this man to her for his devotion to research, and she knew his silent admiration for her, silent because his means were small. She spent half an hour with her thoughts, and then retired to her room. The next morning she was in the park at a quarter before nine, accompanied only by her groom, as Maud had gone to spend a week with friends in Wales. As the sky was threatening, the Row was sparsely filled, and it was not long before she perceived Robert riding towards her from the other side. They descended the hill together.

"I have asked for this interview," he began

sententiously, "in order to tell you that suffering at the same time from disturbance in my married life and from an unrequited passion, I have determined to join my friend Lord South and to proceed to Central Africa."

"On a voyage of discovery or of research?"

"For a tiger shoot. We are going into the wildest and most pestilential country. Both my friend and I are suffering the same pains, and we are seeking the only means at our disposal of relief."

"But do you not consider your life too needful to your country to risk it for some tigers' skins?"

"It will be well to prove my energy and will. Should I not return, it may be that the succession is assured."

"The Duchess is no longer with you, I believe."

"No, she has retired for a season to her home. It is better so. She will be more amenable to reason."

"And it was to tell me this you wished to see me?"

"Yes. To show you what your cruelty has done and to ask you to grant me one meeting before I leave. Ah, if you had accepted the offer which I made you when you were at Redmont, all this might have been averted."

"So that if you are forced to go to nasty places and to risk becoming food for tigers, it is I who am to blame? Well, now, Duke, let us talk this

matter out. When I was at Redmont you asked me if I would be your wife. Had I said yes, what would have happened? I will tell you. You would have never found it in yourself to break the sacred precepts of your house and make a marriage which would have unclassed you in what I shall call your set. No, I know you well enough to be quite certain you would never have done that, although the yachting cruise with me you would have been quite willing to accomplish. Whether you thought you could have made this sacrifice or whether you did not, I don't want to enquire. I simply know that you never would have made it. For any other purpose, however, you fixed on the wrong widow, as you must, by this time, have perceived."

Robert looked away from her, but said: "You doubt my sincerity itself! You say that I would not have kept my word. Why do you think I should be guilty of such conduct?"

"Because I know that you must act as you have been trained to act, as your heredity prescribes, because I have an absolute conviction that you're automatic."

Robert started. "Automatic! This is indeed too much!"

"No, no, it's not. I happen to possess discernment, and I show you to yourself."

"If my cousin had offered what I offered, would you have doubted *his* sincerity?"

"No, for the King of Astia is much less

troubled by dynasticism. He would follow the dictates of his heart—that is if he were allowed.”

“And would you have allowed him?”

“No.”

Robert was silent for some moments, but at length he said:

“This is the first time in my life that I have been spoken to so plainly.”

“Up to now, perhaps, you’ve never heard the truth.”

“I was never before told that I was automatic.”

“Well, but you are. You’re bound to do things which your ancestors did. You are not a free man.”

“If I were freer it would not help me much in gaining favour in your eyes.”

“At last you have grasped that! I compliment you.”

“Is it not extraordinary that I do not lose my patience?”

“It does seem strange, I must admit.”

“But it can’t go on for ever.”

“No, we have arrived at the natural term, I think.”

“I am condemned to an unhappy life.”

“I doubt it.”

“Why?”

“Because it’s not in your nature to be either happy or unhappy.”

“Ah, I forgot I was an automaton.”

"Do not let that rankle in your breast. It's an accident of birth."

"I'm sorry that my birth should seem to you a subject for derision."

"It never did, and you must not misinterpret me."

"But you misinterpret *me*."

"The first syllable of that word you should omit."

Robert made a gesture of impatience. "Do you take a pleasure in inflicting pain?"

"Not more than the surgeon does when he performs an operation."

They rode for some minutes without speaking. Robert asked at length:

"Will you let me come to see you for the last time before I leave?"

She reflected. Then she asked: "When *do* you leave?"

He answered: "In a fortnight's time."

"Come if you like," she said, "to-morrow week, in the afternoon; but I do not promise I shall be alone."

"As usual, I must be content with the smallest mercies. Yes, I shall be there."

He added presently: "But I must ask you if you do not think that you have treated me this morning barbarously?"

"I do. But I, also, have returns to barbarism when occasion calls for them."

He raised his hat. "Good-bye."

She watched him ride away in the direction of the barracks, and after a gallop she went home.

A letter awaited her from Charles, who said :

“ It seems an age since you departed, and yet it’s only a few weeks. Events have marched apace since you were here. The Sugar Bill has passed successfully, and the Socialists have been defeated at the elections, which concluded yesterday. At home there has been a family dispute of great proportions. My sister, backed by all my relatives, by Stonor, and I know not who besides, have called upon me to espouse the equestrian Princess. Either singly or in groups they come to pester me until my life was a misery to myself. But all in vain, for I refused to listen to their blandishments, and yesterday I took the step I hinted to you I should take. I summoned my sister, Stonor, and another Minister, and solemnly declared to them my firm intention of remaining celibate !

“ Ah, if you had seen them ! It was as though they had been suddenly electrified ! It was many moments before either spoke. Then my sister, with her terrible expression, said : ‘ This cannot be ! ’ and Stonor added : ‘ Your Majesty is not aware of the excessive gravity of such a course ! ’ I answered : ‘ Whatever it may cost me, that is what I have resolved to do ! ’ Then they argued and they talked until my patience was exhausted and I left the room.

“ And now I am about to leave for England.

In a few days I shall start. I am coming quite incognito, in absolute disgrace in my own family, and eager for the sympathy of one who has arranged my destiny! If you refused to see me now, I should conceive an absolute distrust of women for the remainder of my life, and that you would not have me do! Adieu. In less than a week I shall be in your walls!

“PS.—Beware of Robert!”

CHAPTER X.

AFTER Vincent had written to welcome Isabel on her return and to express his regret for anything he might have said at their last meeting which had sounded harsh or disrespectful, Isabel and Maud had accepted an invitation to a reception at Vincent's flat. Isabel had hesitated before doing so, because the attitude of Vincent at the villa had displeased her, but she had yielded to Maud, who was curious to see a Socialist's interior, especially that of a Socialist dramatist. Accordingly they presented themselves in the afternoon at the house in Chelsea on the river bank, and were admitted into an anteroom, the walls of which were panelled in carved oak and on the floor of which was a luxurious Persian rug that caused Maud to whisper to her friend:

"Socialism doesn't stint itself in rugs at all events!"

The drawing-room, into which they were shown by a valet, was decorated with an elaborateness which Maud subsequently declared was sumptuous.

Vincent was in the centre of a group, but as soon as he perceived Isabel and Maud, he advanced to meet them, and as Maud also

remarked later, it was almost as though Charles himself had been advancing, so great was the likeness between the playwright and the King.

"It was really kind of you to come," he said, and he led them into the library in which there were no guests.

"I have heard of your work in Astia," he continued, "and how you were the means of forcing even the Astian functionaries to be honest. That was admirably done, and I compliment you. I have also heard of the engagement of the King."

This was said approvingly and as though he meant to absolve her from all blame in connection with the King. He added:

"It was rather kind of his Government to expel me, because my expulsion has advanced me in the party."

"If it has advanced you," Isabel replied, "that means that you've been raised above the heads of others, and if that's possible in Socialism, then what becomes of its equality?"

"Oh, well, of course there must be leaders, but that is only for convenience and implies no rank."

Isabel left her host to talk to Maud, and inspected the contents of the large bookcase which occupied the whole of one side of the room. There was a collection of forbidding treatises upon Political Economy, amongst which *Das Capital* of Marx was prominent. At the side of these was the series of Vincent's plays, richly bound in vellum. Then there were works by Socialists on

Socialistic ethics and on education, and a few works on philosophy.

"And so," said Isabel after a few moments, "you are a student of political economy. It is upon its principles, no doubt, you base your Socialism."

"Mainly, though of course the rock on which it rests is humanitarian."

"Which political economy is not."

"If I could only persuade you to peruse a pamphlet which I wrote a month ago!"

"I'll read it carefully, because you see I'm trying to make up my mind about your system. But tell me, how do you justify these elaborate surroundings according to your notions of wealth distribution. Do you hope that all your comrades will some day have the same?"

"No, scarcely. You see there is something in my nature that makes me yearn for beautiful surroundings, without which I cannot write. I assure you that I manage all the same to contribute to our funds substantially."

"I do not doubt it. Still, you see, you must be considered as a luxurious Socialist."

"You are hard on my modest little flat. I should say that after the palatial homes which you have seen of late, it must be very insignificant."

"The palatial homes were the property of professed upholders of the principle of inequality."

"Would it satisfy your sense of fitness if I

lived in a third floor back like Nitzikine, the author of *The Future State* ? ”

“ Well, that depends on what degree of comfort the common lot is destined to provide when that state is established. ”

“ It will certainly be superior to Nitzikine’s. ”

“ Then why is Nitzikine permitted to remain in it ? ”

“ Because we have not reached the time for distribution yet. ”

“ In the meantime, I should say, the present period of anticipation is by no means an unpleasant one for some. ”

“ Do you know, ” said Vincent, “ that I have never been told this before ? ”

“ That’s not surprising, considering the very common custom of never talking of essential things. ”

But at this moment a short stout man with a round Slav face, long grey hair, and a flowing beard stepped in.

“ Here, ” said Vincent, “ is Nitzikine himself. He can explain his book to you. ”

He introduced and left them.

“ I understand, ” said Isabel, “ that you have written a work describing the social and political conditions which are to succeed the present ones. ”

“ Quite so, ” was the reply.

“ What I should like to know, and what I hope you will excuse me for enquiring, is how you have ascertained what they are to be ? ”

"From a study of the growing forces of the present the future may be predetermined."

"But supposing that the forces which you count upon should cease to grow?"

"They cannot, for they are but the development which was potential in the world from its beginning."

"How do you obtain this knowledge of the origin of things?"

"It comes to me by nature."

"Well, then, Mr. Nitzikine, I envy you. You must be in the secrets of the universe."

"That is, I have intuition."

"But others have intuition also—kings, for instance—and they think they know by it that their system, which is the opposite to yours, is that which was ordained by nature."

"But they are wrong."

"Intuition, therefore, is not always right?"

Embarrassed, Nitzikine stroked his beard.

"I'm afraid," he said, "I cannot follow you into such subtleties."

Isabel smiled, and when Vincent returned with a lady whom he said he wished to introduce, the discussion with the Russian ended. Maud, finding the conversation tedious, had already gone back to the drawing-room.

The young girl who was now introduced to Isabel was stout, and was chiefly noticeable for the circumference of her neck, which her open dress displayed. Miss Ort, as Vincent explained,

gave lectures upon Socialism, and was an authority on Socialistic education.

"If you would attend some of the lectures," Vincent said, "even you might be converted."

"May I ask," enquired Isabel of the stalwart lady, "if you became convinced by a long process of reasoning or by a short?"

"After one perusal of the history of our movement."

"How interesting! Now I have read that history, and it had no influence upon me."

"Perhaps you were trained in another order of ideas."

"I was, but I don't say they were superior. Only they were different."

"Ah, well, if you joined our happy family, you would soon learn how different we are from the men and women who constitute what is called society. We do not prostrate ourselves before each other, or talk evil of each other, or seek to supplant each other, to inflict any of the cruelty upon each other which I have seen inflicted in society, especially in this London, where everybody either worships or despises everybody else, and where money is the only thing that counts. I speak my thoughts. For years I was muzzled in that society. For the smallest criticism of the present régime I was frowned upon or cut. But I emerged from bondage, and now, with my good friends here, I live a life that is natural and free. That life may be lived by all who can break with

the hypocrisies and the servitudes of capitalist society."

"And do you really find," enquired Isabel, "that human nature is better in your ranks than out of them?"

"Undoubtedly, for we mould it into altruistic shape."

"Have you been able to destroy that formidable human weakness, jealousy?"

"Well, not entirely; but we have not yet evolved the definitive type."

"So that you even claim to be able to perfect human nature. Whence do you derive that power?"

"From our doctrines, which prescribe equality, without which humanity must fall a victim to its egoism."

"Ah, well, you are undoubtedly convinced. I only hope you won't be disappointed in your effort to recast society."

Miss Ort asked: "Will you read a pamphlet I have written lately?"

"Certainly," said Isabel, and she moved off to the drawing-room, which by this time was filling rapidly. She soon perceived that the gathering consisted of others than the sectarians, for she recognised some playwrights, novelists, and scribes who were not known to be disciples of Karl Marx. No doubt the former were engaged in gathering impressions to be reproduced in the *singerie* of fiction. Suddenly she recognised a

lady novelist she knew, a worn-out looking woman who had always seemed to her to be weary of the task of telling tales.

"Who would have expected to meet *you* here?" was the exclamation of the lady, and Isabel declared that she was equally surprised at the encounter.

"You see," said the romancer, "one is obliged to go about. I even went the other day to a gathering of Friends, and to-morrow I shall pay a visit to an Anarchist. It's all in the day's work, you know."

"There is no need to apologise," said Isabel, "I also go about."

"You do indeed!" was the reply. "I hear that you have lately been in Astia and royally received."

"Oh, you have heard that also, have you?"

"Yes, it interested me."

"Well, I shouldn't advise you to make romance of it, because there are not quite sufficient grounds."

"Oh, but if I told the truth, it wouldn't be romance."

"Quite so, and yet there are some people who are terribly afraid of being put into a book?"

"Yes, but they are mostly simpletons."

"Exactly; they attach too much importance to the written thing."

Vincent at this moment appeared, asking Isabel to allow him to introduce to her a great French

Socialist who had just arrived, and presently she found herself speaking to a stout, high-shouldered man of fifty who, she knew, was the leader of a faction and an absolute believer in the cataclysmic method.

"May I enquire," Isabel asked after a few moments' conversation, "whether you find the same conditions here as in your own country?"

"Oh, very different. You see we passed through a second revolution comparatively recently, while you are still in monarchy."

"That is true," said Isabel, "and I have often thought that if we ever had a Socialistic State in England, the Socialists of the period would ask the Sovereign to head it."

Duclaux laughed. "Precisely. From all appearances, that is just what might occur. You are so different from us!"

"And yet," continued Isabel, "I had always understood that your movement was completely international, that your doctrines were the same in London as in Timbuctoo."

"They are, no doubt, but their application is unfortunately apt to vary."

Isabel reflected for a moment. Then she said:

"Might I ask you what in your opinion is the duty of a modern king?"

"To abdicate!"

"Would *you* do that if you had been born a king?"

"Undoubtedly, if conviction had once come to me of the error of my ways."

"Yes, but it could not come, unless by a miracle."

"I admit it would be difficult. But I have written a dialogue between a Socialist and a King, and if——"

"With pleasure," Isabel said smiling. "Mr. Vincent will give you my address. Please send your brochure soon."

She crossed the room with the purpose of re-joining Maud, when suddenly she found herself face to face with Miles.

"You here, Professor!" she exclaimed with unfeigned surprise.

"Yes," was the reply, "but my presence can afford no firm grounds for concluding that I am a colleague of the host."

"And yet I thought your views inclined that way?"

"I have often tried to make it understood that my views on politics are not expressed."

"But they may often be inferred. Your conversation with the Duke, for instance, seemed to me significant."

"Insignificant, I fear. But tell me, pray, what has become of that remarkable young man?"

"He is about to start for Central Africa, to shoot."

"You need not have told me with what object he is going. If he went at all, it must be necessarily for that."

"He might have gone on a voyage of discovery."

"Yes, but that was not in his intellectual get-up. His last manifesto afforded me a proof of that. No nation could be governed by that mind."

"But he might have an able Minister who governed him."

"Like Charles of Astia? No doubt, but ministers come and go and unwise kings remain."

"King Charles is not an unwise king!"

"Not recently, perhaps; but I am told that he has had a counsellor of late of no ordinary value."

"Count Stonor, I suppose you mean."

"No—Lady Strange."

"She did nothing but suggest. It was the King who executed."

"And what an execution! They tell me that the city teems with Astian administrators ejected by the new régime of honesty."

"Poor men! I'm rather sorry for them, all the same."

"They also tell me," Miles continued with a quiet smile, "that one of them has turned a Socialist!"

Isabel laughed heartily at this. "No doubt," she said, "he is in favour of a distribution of advantage."

At this moment there entered two exceedingly

well-dressed women, both young and handsome in a somewhat artificial way. Isabel enquired of Miles if he happened to know who they might be, and he replied: "Yes, actresses, ladies who nightly show the actions of the foolish to the foolish. I believe the dark one plays the heroine in one of our friend's dramas."

"Of course," said Isabel, "I did not recognise her. She played the wife's part in *The Stigma*."

"That I cannot say."

"What a pleasant life our friend must have," said Isabel, "surrounded by these pretty women!"

Miles smiled enigmatically. "Yes."

"Less happy, perhaps, than a detached philosopher like you."

"Well, but it appears to me that you are a remarkable example of detachment!"

"You may be right, you may be wrong. I scarcely know myself."

"But some day, I predict, you will become—attached."

"To a prince or to a peasant?"

"Probably to neither. You will find a middle term."

"Ah, well, Professor, *che sarà, sarà!*"

But Vincent now came round with the dark-haired actress and introduced her as Miss Constance Cole.

"I saw you playing in *The Stigma*," Isabel said

at once, "and derived much pleasure from your presentation of the wife."

"A part which gave me much to think about," Miss Cole replied. "Indeed! *The Stigma* was difficult for all of us. You know that, don't you, Mr. Author?"

"I fear," said Vincent, "that it was not easy. A play with a purpose of that kind is always difficult to act, I have been told."

But Isabel said: "It seems to me if I were a dramatist I should avoid the purpose in my plays, because a play with a purpose means an attempt to draw from one particular case a general conclusion. Because in Mr. Vincent's play the King's son comes to grief, it is suggested that all like him must do the same. But there is no doubt they need not, and they don't. And after all, if you come to think of it, it's better to have a royal father than many that one might have had in the lottery of birth."

"What do you say to that, Mr. Vincent?" Miles enquired.

"I say that such paternity is bad."

"Ah, I forgot. You don't want any father but the State!"

"No. I have not embraced that doctrine which is only held by some who would be the first, I fear, to disavow it, if they thought it likely to obtain."

"What!" ejaculated Miles, "do you mean to say that there is insincerity among you?"

"I regret to say there is, although I did not mean to own it."

"Human things," said Miles, "are always human, never—superhuman!"

"That's exactly as I see them," Isabel remarked, and Miss Cole added: "Yes, that's as they are! Therefore I'm no Socialist. I don't believe that men and women can improve by whatever names they call themselves."

"I would not advise you to make rash predictions," Vincent said. "We shall all be Socialists some day."

Miss Cole said suddenly: "Why, there's critic Jones! How did you entice him to come here? I was told he never went to authors' houses."

"No, but you see," said Vincent smiling, "he has lately joined our ranks."

"Imprudent man! He will lose his situation."

"No, for his paper's on the road towards us also."

"Imprudent paper. It will lose its readers."

"No, for it takes a plebiscite each year and steers accordingly."

The group broke up as the actress wanted to reach the critic and Miles was about to leave.

Vincent said to Isabel: "I entreat you not to run away at once. They will all leave soon, and then we can have a talk."

And it was as he had said. After they had taken tea and listened to a monologue by a *débutante*, the gathering broke up shortly before six.

Isabel remained in the anteroom with Maud, unwilling to go back to the library, and it was here that Vincent was forced to speak to her while Maud amused herself by reading the evening paper in the small recess at the remote end.

“At length,” he said, “I have an opportunity of speaking to you alone! You remember our last meeting when I was placed in the presence of the King. You thought me churlish and unnatural. I could see it in your face. But you did not know what I was suffering. I could not bear the air of indulgent patronage which he assumed. Nor could I see you there with him without a pang of apprehension. This man was my cousin and yet not my cousin. He was placed upon a pinnacle in the esteem of millions with whom I was a cipher to be dealt with by the police! All the feelings which I had imagined the hero of my play to feel, I felt. I wanted to speak, but my lips were sealed by conflicting thoughts. I never realised so intensely, so acutely, how deep a wrong is done—to one like me. Since my return I have been reading history, and have ascertained that all, or nearly all, in my position have led disgraceful lives even down to the Mornny of the third Empire in France. Happily, I have been an exception, but I have never ceased to feel a sense of the injustice I have suffered and to revolt against the morals of a hypocritical society.”

“Vincent, listen to me. You are a dramatist,

meeting almost daily a class of women who are held by many to be fascinating. Now supposing that in the course of your career you had met one of these women who had satisfied that longing which we all possess for an affinity, a woman, in short, with whom you had grown intimate, but whom you could not marry because you were not free. And supposing that a child had sprung from such a union, what would you then have said of irresponsibility? Would you have accused yourself?"

"It has not happened, and it will not happen, and I find it difficult to realise it. I believe I should have blamed myself for the remainder of my life."

"And I believe that you would have blamed yourself at first and then, finding you could not live on bad terms with yourself, you would have found extenuating circumstances, ascribed, no doubt, to nature, those impulses which were stronger than your will. Do you see, Vincent, we are not the perfect beings which we would like to think we are."

Vincent reflected for some moments. He said at length:

"I know, I know. But yet, but yet——"

"I guess what it is that troubles you. It's the thought that they are princes. If your father had been of the common herd you would have thought less of the—inconvenience. But do you think that it was entirely without advantage to

yourself, this famous fathering? Do you think such people as these royal ones who have had benefits bestowed upon them from their birth are bad progenitors? Something must remain of their superior existence and go down to their children. How do you know that your very talent is not due to the richer nature which you have inherited?"

"How do I know that had I had a rougher father, one less enervated by luxury and indolence, I might not have had that mental quality which yields the masterpiece? I am afraid that you still argue under the influence of the old respect for royalty."

"Well, well, if we broach the subject of heredity, I fear that we shall get involved in a maze of difficulties. Let us leave that for the present, but accept my warning that all recrimination on your part is worse than useless, and is unworthy of you. Make up your mind to bear your lot and let me go."

"No, no, not yet. I have still to ask you a great favour. I have something, a piece of paper which I wish to show you. I had hoped to be able to show it you to-day, but my lawyer, who is preparing it, has gone away for a short holiday, and so I cannot. But if you will allow me to come to see you in a week, I shall bring it with me."

"Come if you like," said Isabel, "but don't talk of lawyers. There is no class of whom I

stand in so much awe. I did not know that Socialists had anything to do with them."

"One of our great authorities has said that as long as we live in our present society we are unable to avoid adopting some of its devices."

"A convenient dictum, certainly."

"Do not mock us, for we stand for right and good."

"Then you are better than I, who stand for nothing but myself."

"No, you are not an egoist. I have studied you and know your nature which you hide. You are worthy to be one of us, as I trust you may be some day."

"I shouldn't advise you to count on that. I should want to be much more convinced than I have been this afternoon by what I've seen and heard. Pray don't begin a disquisition, for it's growing late."

"I shall take another opportunity. In the meantime, will you let me ask you just one question? I know I have no right to ask it, but I am impelled to do so by an impulse which I am unable to resist. Is it your intention to return to Astia?"

"You ask me what I do not know myself. I have no present wish to go, but I may pass through the country at some later stage of my existence."

"Better later on than now."

"Yes, when the hair is grey and the eyes are dim, one is no longer worthy of suspicion!"

"I suspect nothing. I only fear a danger, the greatest of all dangers."

"My poor Vincent, you need not alarm yourself on my account. I, too, can see a danger, and I think I know how to avoid one."

He sighed. "Ah, yes, you are very wise!"

"I should be much obliged if you would leave what you call my wisdom out of the account. We women do not care to be considered very wise, you know."

"There are so few who could be so considered."

"More than you suspect."

"Perhaps, for women are so mysterious."

"The time is coming when they will be better understood than they hitherto have been. And so, good evening."

On the way home Isabel and Maud discussed the Socialist's reception.

Maud said: "A greater set of madcaps I never saw. Not one of them appeared to me to know what he or she was talking of. They used the same words constantly, and they didn't seem to tire of the repetition. And, Isabel, shall I tell you what I think of Vincent? Well, I think he is a fool."

"Oh, Maud! That's rather much to say of a successful author."

"It's what might easily be said of many,

especially when they indulge in politics. Do you not see, dear, that if he gives his money to the party, he's absurd, and if he doesn't, then he's only shamming and incurring all the blame of decent folk for nothing. I was told the other day that since *The Stigma* his receipts have fallen. People won't go to his plays as readily as formerly. I fancy he doesn't know England yet, although he was bred and born here. Nothing of that revolutionary kind is ever pardoned, and he may as well go and drown himself as try to get into favour again with the people who really count. I cannot understand how any man can be so silly as to spoil his chances in that way."

"I am myself inclined to think he is too rash. But what would you have? He's got his head full of all kinds of notions about social justice and the wrongs inflicted by the people in possession. A man in that state must do unwise things. But there he is, and on the whole I like him better with his enthusiasms than I should if he were the grim calculator of the type which is so common nowadays. I assure you I prefer him so."

"Don't you think that there's much pose in his enthusiasms?"

"No, he is sincere."

"Oh, then he *must* be naïve. A being meant for a more poetic age."

"Little cynic! What has made you form so low an estimate of our times?"

“ Well, I can’t help seeing that they’re rotten.”

“ Don’t you think that when your prince arrives they will appear all golden ? ”

“ No, they would seem better, I’ve no doubt, but bad for all that. You must not think that I don’t observe, because I do, and I have seen that there are cracks in our society from top to bottom, cracks that can’t be mended. Nobody is happy, though everybody tries with all his might to be. To hold your own, in these days, it is needful to be always fighting.”

“ Don’t you think it always was so, Maudie ? ”

“ No, I can’t ; for my mother used to describe to me the times when she was young, and I’m certain they were very different from ours. People then appear to have lived rather stodgy, but far more pleasant lives.”

“ Distance lends enchantment to the view ! ”

“ Perhaps, yet I am sure that something’s wrong.”

No more was said upon the subject, and they reached the house both in a reflective frame of mind.

After dinner that evening in the drawing-room Isabel took up the evening paper, and the first article she chanced upon arrested her attention. It was headed “ In the cause of Science,” and it began : “ Science in these days does not lack devotees who are prepared to undergo the greatest hardships and to take the greatest risks in the pursuit of its ideals, but rarely has more patient,

self-effacing work been done than that which has been accomplished by Dr. Leslie Murray, who, for the last two years, has been engaged in studying zymotic diseases in Central Africa, partly as an independent enquirer and partly on behalf of the Medical Research Society. Starting from London a little more than two years ago with two assistants, he reached Cairo in the spring, and thence proceeded through the heart of the Soudan to little known and almost unexplored regions beyond Lake Chad, making his headquarters at Kodongo. Here he laboured for a year under the most adverse conditions, losing both his companions through enteric fever, contracting it himself and narrowly escaping death. For another year he laboured still, in constant danger of his life from treachery and the hostile enterprises of the natives. Fortunately, thanks to his excellent physique and to his natural resourcefulness, he surmounted all the difficulties with which his task was fraught, and he is now returning with what experts consider the richest store of knowledge that has yet been gathered by any one enquirer. In addition to his researches Dr. Murray found time to carry out surveys of considerable value. A nation may feel hopeful of its future which can produce men of this distinction."

Isabel put down the paper, reflected for some moments, and re-read the paragraph. Then, as she was still thoughtful, Maud, who had looked

up from her book, asked what she had been reading.

The answer was: "I have been reading of a *man*!"

"A superman?"

"Yes, it would be right to call him that!"

CHAPTER XI.

IN her drawing-room a week later, Isabel was saying :

“ Do not leave the house, Maud, I’m expecting Robert of Varlemon to-day, and I don’t want to be alone. It’s not that I’m afraid of him, as long as he is in a normal state, but there’s never any knowing what state he will be in. Do you understand ? ”

“ Quite, dear. But is it not to-day that his Majesty is coming ? ”

“ Yes.”

“ And Vincent ? ”

“ Yes.”

“ But they may meet.”

“ I cannot help it. They all fixed on the same day, and to say the truth I’m not altogether sorry that they did.”

“ Which, I wonder, will come first ? ”

“ I hope it may be the King.”

“ In your place I should hope so too. But will you have them all three in here at once, supposing that they should appear at the same time ? ”

“ No, not at first, and I’ve told Jeannette to show each into a separate room as he arrives, and

I hope that it will all go well. This is a day for deciding things, you know—a day I have put off too long.”

“That serious tone and face, Isabel, are fateful, certainly. I hope you are not contemplating anything too dreadfully decisive, because you’ve got decision in your eyes to-day, and I’m afraid you may be just about forgetting what a privilege it is to be friends with his Majesty. Think what introductions he could give you if he wished, or rather if his sister wished.”

“You did well to make that reservation. The social benefits could only come through her. But I’m not very anxious to make social capital of my acquaintance with the Royal Family of Astia. Of late I’ve come to see a little clearer into things than I did at first. I’ve exercised what the French call my *jugeotte*, and arrived at some conclusions which I hope are sound.”

“Oh, that they’re sure to be—too sound.”

“And why too sound?”

“Because they may be against the established plan of things.”

“Which you yourself just now admitted was defective!”

“It may be so, but it’s the only one that counts.”

The sound of a motor palpitating in the street caused Maud to hasten to the window. “It’s the King!”

She left, and presently the door was opened

and Charles, announced as the Duke of Listin, entered.

Slowly and somewhat gravely he kissed her hand, retaining it a little longer than was necessary.

"Once again," he said, "I am in England, but I only make an apparition, for to-morrow I depart. I have come for no other purpose than to see you."

"I am flattered, yet distressed—flattered that I should be the object of so much solicitude, distressed that your Majesty should take the trouble to come here on my account."

"Your words are cold, and bode no good!"

"What can I say that I have not said before?"

"You know what I have written you. I have declared my fixed intention of remaining celibate, and at the present moment I am unpopular, as unpopular as it is possible to be. They did their best to keep my resolution secret, but somehow it got known, and now I am accused of want of patriotism—a virtue in which a king is commonly supposed to be more than ordinarily rich. The rumour reached the ears of the Princess whom they wanted me to marry, and the result is that there's dissatisfaction with me all around. The tide has turned against me. I shall stem it, but it's hard to be alone in times like this, deprived of the presence of the woman for whose sake I would dare more."

"You have dared too much for her already,

far too much, and your future happiness depends upon your power of forgetting."

"I have told you once before that I have not that power, and I say that if I had I would not use it now. What! forget my friend and counsellor, my confidante! That never!"

He sat beside her as he had done in the Villa Oriol and said:

"Far from wishing to forget, I have come to ask you to take pity on me and not to let me pass the remainder of my life with a great regret at heart. I have made you many offers, suggested many plans, any one of which would have brought happiness; but you have hitherto been obdurate. The other day, as I was walking with the General in the park, we came upon two lovers on a seat. Hand in hand, they were looking into each other's eyes. 'Tell me, my friend,' I said to the young man, 'can you conceive a happier state on earth than that in which you dwell?' At first he seemed resentful at my unwarranted intrusion, but when he recognised me, he rose, took off his hat, and faltered: 'No, your Majesty!' And then I asked him what he would do if there existed an obstacle to his union with the girl who stood there blushing deeply. He answered: 'Break it, your Majesty, or die!' Now that is what I call a brave young lover—a brave young lover and a brave young love!"

"It was fortunate for him he was not born a prince, or he would have had to die."

"But why have you always sought to enforce the discipline of our order? Why have you always been the first to remind me of it?"

"Because, as I have often told you, I know that your only chance of happiness lies in its observance."

"Better, then, to have been born a peasant!"

"No, I do not think so, and for the rest—surely a soldier should love discipline."

"For a woman I have seen the finest soldier in the world forsake his duty."

"A poor kind of woman she must have been who let him!"

"I am afraid that you in England experience the love impulse in a different way from us. While we are consumed by passion, you are only calmly sensible of it. In one sense you are more fortunate, in another, you are less."

"Do not think that we are feelingless. By no means, only from ages of self-control we have acquired the power of repression."

"But why do you repress what is natural and good?"

"We do not always, but there are times when we feel we must."

"And the present time is one of them for you?"

"Alas! it is."

"But this is error, madness. Such ideas prepare the way for great regrets. We must not be the causes of our own unhappiness! Ah, you

do not realise the need for less stern sentiments ! You cannot see that I am living in a state of unrest and suspense, not knowing where to turn for ease of mind. At home I am surrounded by a host of women who press themselves upon me and who are willing to trample in the dust their duty to their husbands. But I have reached an age when the heart craves something more than Court intrigues, when it longs for a great affection to endure to the end of life. Not one of these yielding women could inspire it. None that I have ever met, none, none but you ! ”

During this speech Isabel had kept her eyes fixed on the floor, but her hands were clasped together and her bosom heaved.

“ No,” he continued ; “ since I have met you I have come to understand that there is no one in the world who so embodies all I most desire in a woman, and I am as a spoilt child who sorrows if his wishes are not gratified. This is the first time in my life that I have been denied what I had set my heart on gaining.”

“ Yes, you have said truly. You are as a child that has been always given what he asked, and who cannot understand that there should be a check to his desire. Yet a check there must needs be ! Dear friend, give me your attention once again. I want to show you that your reiteration of a sentiment to which I have never said I was insensible, but which is hopeless, is unfortunate for both of us, since it keeps alive a heartache

which only time can heal. Think of it, think of the impossibility of converting me to do that which my reason tells me to be wrong, and try to rid yourself of this obsession. You form too high an estimate of me, for you are generous by nature and enthusiastic. I am not the faultless woman you suppose. It has been said that I am selfish—and shall I say it?—I have a physical defect which might damp the ardour of an aspirant. No sculptor, I am sure, would take me for a model. That much I may say. As to my mind, it has some intuitions, but it is sadly lacking in sound knowledge, as my father, a savant, used to say, accusing me of indolence in study. In addition to that, I am impatient and strong-willed. Now you will admit, I think, that the *ensemble* makes a different picture from that which you had formed."

"You exaggerate in order to discourage me. But that is useless, and serves only to increase my longing. Your personality, the mysterious something which pervades you, is what, above all other things, must ever constitute your charm. You cannot be as other women in my sight. I always see in you a higher and more perfect type."

"It's very strange," said Isabel, "and I don't know what mirage makes you see me better than I am."

"There is no mirage, but an image clear and well defined."

She shook her head. "It would have been far better for us both if we had never become friends!"

"Perhaps, if we are to part. But I have come to-day with a hope that this is not to be our final meeting."

"Why should it be? I trust that when I pass through Astia a few years hence my good friend will not refuse to see me, whatever may have happened in the meantime."

"You know you will be always welcome if I am still alive."

"As you will be, in the natural course of things."

"The natural course is not always that which happens."

"I hope you do not think that if you do not gain the woman who seems to you desirable now, you will decline, for I know well that on your return you will be drawn into the vortex of your daily life; that gradually—in a few years—the image of this woman in your mind will fade. You will form other friendships. An advance in years, no matter how small it may be, produces forgetfulness in spite of all."

"And is it really possible that you can coldly plan this renunciation of the sweetest hopes? Can you really find it in you to send me back disconsolate to wait till this oblivion comes, supposing that it ever could? No, I refuse to credit it!"

"It is not *coldly* planned, but with most earnest

and sincere solicitude for your welfare, as you will recognise some day. It's a great mistake in life to take a tragic view of things. Life is conditional upon its being pleurably lived. Your nature is one that absolutely needs a happy life. That life you will eventually lead in the pleasant land of Astia, for I prophecy that if the horsey lady does not please you, another will be found who will. That is all that I can say. I have reached the end of all my arguments. It is for you to shake off sentiment and bow to circumstance. That is what I myself have been obliged to do."

Charles was about to reply when a servant entered with two slips of paper which Isabel perused.

"And now," she said, "I must ask your Majesty to excuse me for a moment."

She left, and when she reached the hall, the servant told her that the Duke of Varlemon was in the library and Mr. Vincent in the dining-room.

She hesitated. Then she turned the handle of the library door. Robert was leaning against the mantel with his arms folded.

"I have come," he said, "on the appointed day, for the last time before leaving. To-morrow night we quit this country for Marseilles, where our steamer is awaiting us."

He paused, as though he wished to study the effect his words had made. Then, Isabel being silent, he resumed;

"I have thought of what you said when I met you in the park. My insistence, you considered, was offensive; you would not believe that I was in reality sincere. If you will let me prove to what extent I am sincere, I ask you to impose some obligation on me when I am in Africa, some feat of difficult performance, at risk of life. Whatever you impose I shall perform, and in the presence of my friend!"

"My dear Duke, we are not living in the Middle Ages, and I am the last woman in the world to exact such homage, which would entitle you to I don't know what on your return. No, I have no intention of imposing such a test. The only request that I could make is one no doubt you will not grant."

"And what is that?"

"That you will give up this tiger-killing and go and fetch your wife from her parents' home and do your best to live with her in harmony for the remainder of your life or hers. Depend upon it you will not be comfortable in your position if you don't."

Robert made a gesture of impatience. "Once again you mock me, and my patience is nearly at an end. You would not discourage Charles like that. You owned to me not long ago that you reserved a different treatment for him. Why? Because he is a showy kind of person who whispers nothings into women's ears, nothings which have their purpose in his mind. Surely

you must know his reputation for excessive—gallantry! Yes, you know it, but you do not mind. Using his prestige as a lever, he has always tried to supplant me wherever he has seen that my affections have been fixed, but I have borne it long enough, and I have resolved to tell him so.”

“I refuse to listen to your imputations against my friend. They are unworthy of you. They are—I shall say it—mean. If you have come here this afternoon to talk like this it would have been better had you stayed away.”

“I will say no more of him excepting this, that you have made me hate him.”

“Hate? If you hate your cousin because of me, he might equally hate you for the same reason, and as neither is any *more* than a friend to me, you will see that the hatred, in either case, would be without a reasonable cause.”

Robert made another movement of impatience.

“I cannot vie with you in dialectics, but yet I’d like to say that there are various degrees of friendship and many ways of interpreting the term.”

“My poor Duke, I have much forbearance; but if you insist on making these insinuations, I shall have to say good afternoon. How many women, do you think, would have listened to these petty hints so long?”

Robert was about to answer when she stopped him.

“Say no more. You’ve said too much already.

Listen, I am going to leave you to your meditations for a while to see another of my *friends*. When I am ready to renew this talk I shall send for you. I shall not be very long, and I hope you'll wait. I should like to part with you fraternally."

So saying she left the room and crossed the hall to the dining-room, where she found Vincent walking to and fro before the fireplace.

"I was afraid that you had forgotten me," he said. "At one time I imagined that you did not wish to see me, but now that you have come, suspense is over."

"I'm rather in a hurry, Vincent, and if you've something to say to me I must ask you to utter it as soon as possible."

Somewhat disconcerted by this speech, Vincent said:

"Of late I have been revolving in my mind the reasons you might have for turning a deaf ear to my entreaties. I told myself that supposing I did not quite displease you and you would forgive my birth, it might be my profession that you did not like, or else it might be my Socialism, both of which, alas, are part of my very self. And then it dawned upon me that you might entertain the fears of many, that my tenets were too dangerous from a material point of view, that the wife of a collectivist might some day have to live in a state approaching want, that neither her own possessions nor my own would be secure."

He drew from his pocket a paper which he unfolded, and continued :

“ Well, in order to remove such fears if they existed, I asked my lawyer to prepare this statement of my chattels. By it you will see that my fortune, which increases yearly by ten to fifteen thousand, is safely placed in mortgages on property and land, as well as in Government securities, and I am here to certify to you that as long as our present society exists I should make no change, and that even if a great upheaval were to come about in Europe, for your sake I would, if you wished it, go out to the East, where the revolution will be delayed for half a century or more.”

“ Oh, really, really,” exclaimed Isabel suppressing a desire to burst out laughing, “ this is much too much ! What, you would consent, for my sake, to evade the clutches of the distributor ! What, you would still, for me, hold on to capital when its possession was no longer lawful ! Well, I had heard that men will sometimes sacrifice themselves for women, but I never thought I should be offered a renunciation quite so great. But, my good Vincent, pack up your statement, which has shown me that you are more prudently a Socialist than I supposed, that you’re wiser in your generation than I knew. To your very flattering request I regret my answer must be what it has been from the first. It’s not your birth, it’s no material consideration which com-

pels me to say this: I say it simply because the inner prompting which has always been my guide in life is silent in respect of you. I'm sorry, but it isn't to be helped, and I'm sure that you will easily discover a woman who will make you happy. Let me give you this advice, however. Choose her from among the members of your confraternity. In that way it will not be needful that you should exile yourself to Eastern lands when the levelling day arrives."

"So then," said Vincent, "you gather all my hopes and at one stroke dash them to the ground!"

"You know well, Vincent, that they should never have been formed."

"And in addition," continued Vincent, "you laugh at the sacrifice which I had brought myself to make!"

"Forgive me if I seemed amused. I know it was a very serious sacrifice, and I'm sure you must have struggled with yourself before you offered it. But you must really become reasonable and accept the situation as it is. Try to call to your aid in life a little more philosophy. I assure you that for my part I could never have dispensed with the modicum which I possess."

She paused a moment, but before Vincent could reply, resumed:

"I must now ask you to excuse me for a moment. I have another visitor who by this time must be growing weary. Do not go, for I have yet a little more to say to you,"

She left, and ascending the stairs hurriedly, re-entered the drawing-room, where she found Charles seated in the window looking out disconsolately at the street.

"The sun has returned," he said, in a saddened tone.

"To set," she answered, "shortly. And now let me enquire if during my absence you have made your bow to circumstance and accepted the inevitable."

"No. You know the motto of our house is *Semper invicti*."

"Then I am afraid it is about to be belied. But you may console yourself by thinking that if you have failed, others have not been more successful."

Saying this, she rang the bell, and a servant appeared. "Ask the gentleman in the library to come." The servant left and, in answer to the King's look of surprise, Isabel explained: "I have been obliged to take the only means I could devise to convince you all of certain truths, and to remove some misconceptions."

Charles was silent, and in a few moments Robert entered.

"What! you here!" Charles exclaimed with an angrier expression than Isabel had ever seen upon his face. "What are you doing here?"

"It seems to me," said Robert, "that I might ask you the same question."

"You compromise my friend,"

"Far less than you, cousin."

"Robert," said Charles, "you will be good enough to leave us. This lady has something to say to me."

"Lady Strange has also something to say to *me*."

"I was here first," said Charles.

"I am here now," said Robert.

"Lady Strange must then decide between us."

"There is nothing to decide between you," said Isabel, "for I want you both to stay. I am going to call a third—enthusiast."

She rang the bell, told the servant who appeared to show up the visitor who was in the dining-room. There were a few moments of silence, during which the cousins cast angry glances at each other. Then Vincent entered, to the evident surprise of Charles and to the disgust of Robert.

"Here," said Isabel, "is a friend who is already known to both of you. As he happened to call to-day I have thought it would be well to gather you together in this room and to say to you collectively what I have hitherto left unsaid. In the first place I must suggest that you will all shake hands."

The three men made a simultaneous exclamation: "Oh!"

"I say that you must all shake hands!"

There was suddenly an instinctive withdrawal of the right hand on the part of each of the

aspirants, who glanced at Isabel reproachfully. But as they neither spoke nor advanced a step towards each other, Isabel said :

“ Duke, give your hand to his Majesty at once.”

Robert hesitated, and at length with evident reluctance he crossed the room and held out his hand to Charles, who took it.

“ And now, Mr. Vincent,” said Isabel, “ it is your turn to shake hands with my friends.”

But Vincent said : “ I am quite sure that these gentlemen are not anxious to shake hands with me. Why, then, should I be anxious to shake hands with them ?

“ Because I ask you as a favour to comply with my request.”

“ If you put it in that way,” said Vincent, “ then I must.”

He advanced a few steps towards Charles, who moved some paces towards him, and they shook hands automatically.

“ That is well,” said Isabel, “ and now, Mr. Vincent, please complete your task.”

Vincent made a movement towards Robert, who immediately drew back.

“ Duke,” said Isabel, “ give your hand to Mr. Vincent.”

“ I regret I cannot,” Robert said. “ On one occasion I was present at a play by Mr. Vincent, and I know the valuation which he placed upon his—class.”

Vincent was about to answer angrily when Isabel restrained him.

It was she who took up his defence.

"Let us be accurate, Duke," she said. "If Mr. Vincent showed one of what you are pleased to term 'his class' in an unfavourable light, he also exhibited one of *your* class in another, and in point of turpitude there wasn't much difference between the two. Can you not get into your—ducal—head that what is said in a play is not of universal application? Is it because one sheep is black that the rest of a flock must be? Surely you can distinguish between samenesses and differences. If not, I'll send you a little treatise on the subject. Come, now, shake hands."

"I refuse," said Vincent.

"Absolutely?" Isabel enquired.

"Absolutely."

"Very well, Vincent, I have done my best to reconcile you, but it seems that is not possible, and I admit that the Duke is the offender and that I should find it difficult to pardon him if I were in your place."

She paused a moment, and then resumed:

"And now, my good friends, listen. During the last year, when I have met you frequently, I have had abundant opportunity of ascertaining how you think and feel, but you have not altogether known my thoughts and feelings, for, like most women, I have often hidden them. You represent the two

extremes of the social scale—two at the top and one at the bottom, as society is constituted still. Well, now, I am convinced that neither of your systems is the true one. The upper is based on privilege and irresponsibility, the fruits of which reveal themselves too plainly, the lower asks of human nature virtues which its adherents don't possess. But you, my friends, have been trained in these two systems. They are part and parcel of yourselves. You cannot move outside their limits. But those limits are not mine, and mine they can never be. I won't detain you by explaining the few simple rules which I have formed to guide me in the thorny path of life, or those which I conceive should guide a nation, but I shall say, in taking leave of you, that my feelings towards you will remain as they have always been, such as they could only be, and that you have my earnest wishes for your welfare while you are pursuing what you deem to be the right.

“I trust that you, Vincent, will continue on the prudent course which you have shown me you are taking, and which I know is tempered by no little charity, also that you will think and write no more of stigmas. I hope that you, Duke, will continue—to pretend—for considering the views I've just expressed, you will not be offended if I tell you that I think it better for your country you were a Pretender always rather than a King!

“To your Majesty, whose frank and manly character I have so often had occasion to admire,

"I wish perpetual youth, a happy marriage, and a prudent and successful reign!"

She ceased speaking, and the three men stood for some moments looking on the floor irresolutely. Robert was the first to speak.

"I did not come here for such advice as I have just received, and you have cured me, Lady Strange, from repeating the mistake of coming."

So saying, after a frigid bow, he turned and left.

Vincent paused a moment, gave one glance at Isabel, and after a sorrowful "Good-bye," withdrew.

Charles, who appeared disinclined to follow his example, was about to speak when suddenly a servant entered announcing "Count Stonor."

Erect and dignified as usual, his face impassive as before, Stonor stepped into the room to the astonishment of Isabel and Charles. He bowed to the King and then to Isabel, to whom he said:

"I trust you will excuse the liberty I take in coming here, but I was told at the Embassy his Majesty was visiting, and I guessed that it might be at your house."

"What is the meaning of this?" Charles asked in a heightened tone. "Am I never to be freed from your—offensive supervision?"

"The meaning, sire, is that an event of the gravest import has occurred on the Alesian frontier which I cannot explain except in private, and that the presence of your Majesty is required without delay at home."

"Why was I not informed of this before I left?"

"Because the news came subsequently. Perceiving the danger of the situation I came after a consultation with my colleagues. Sire, there is not a moment to be lost. The train leaves Charing Cross at six."

Charles hesitated, as though half suspicious. Isabel, however, said:

"Go, your Majesty. Obey the call of duty."

"So be it," Charles said hoarsely. "Thus, adieu!"

He retreated with a quick and nervous step. Stonor followed, and as he was on the threshold of the door he turned to Isabel.

"This time you are not victorious!"

In another moment Isabel, at the window, saw the King and Stonor drive off in a motor. It was all over. Maud appeared.

"Well, what have you done with your admirers?"

"Dismissed them all!"

"And when Dr. Murray comes to ask you to marry him, as he is sure to do, will you consent?"

"I think so."

THE END.

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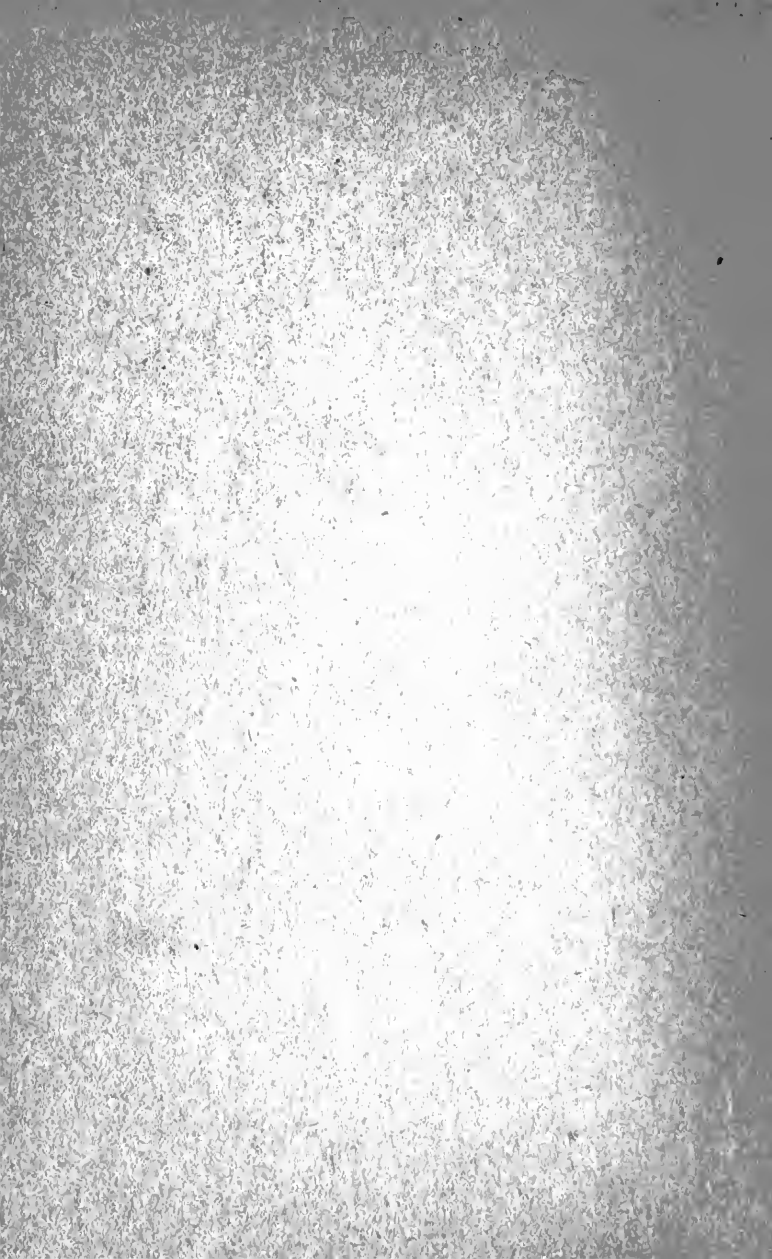
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